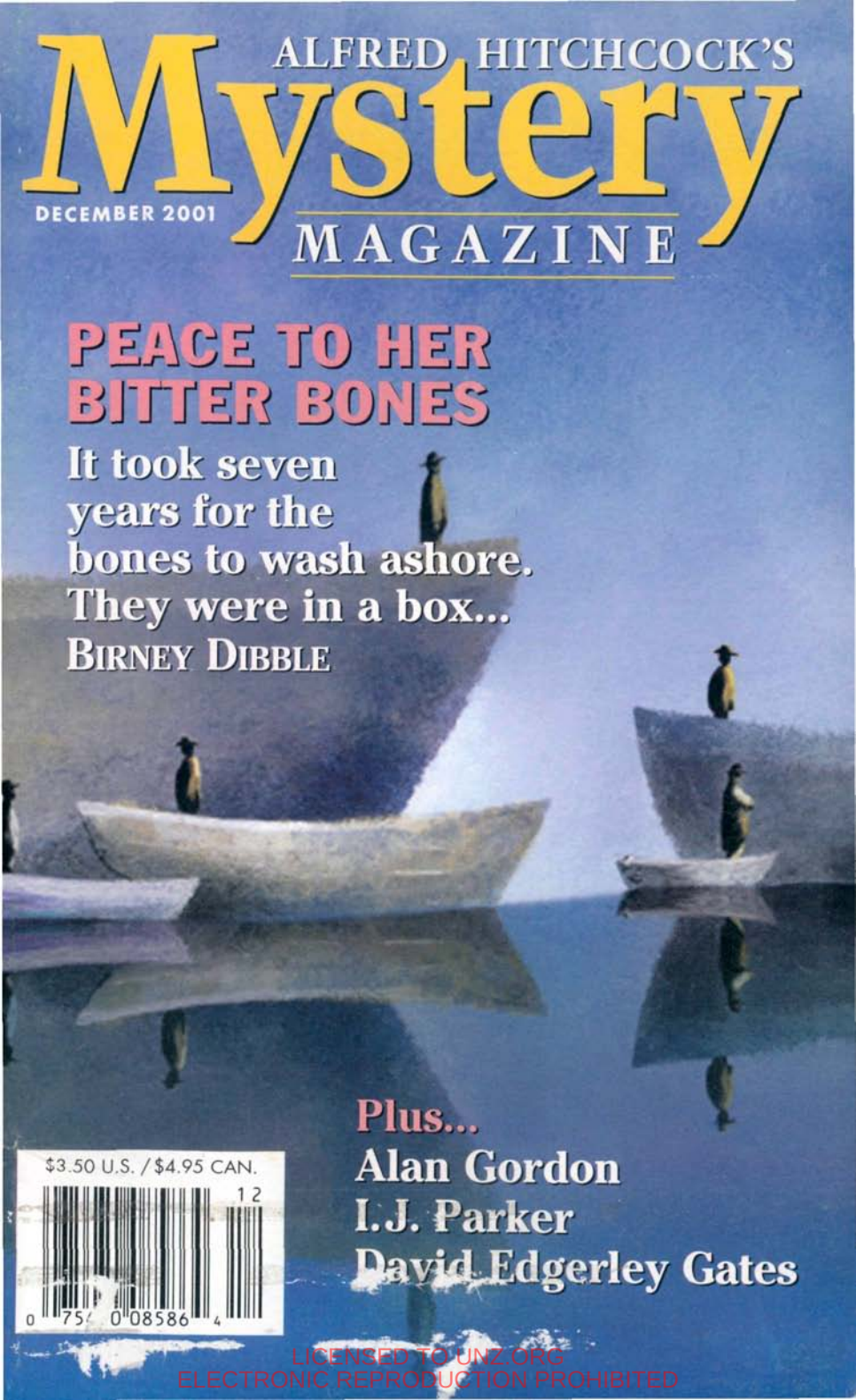
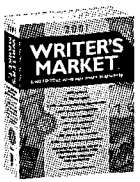
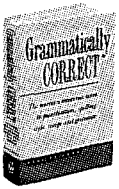


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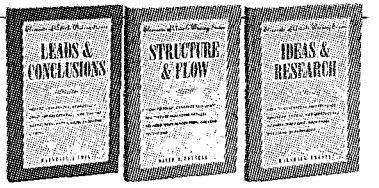
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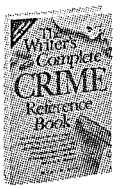
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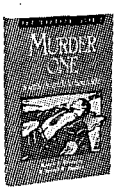
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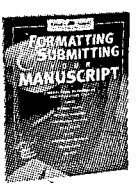
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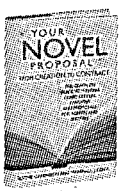
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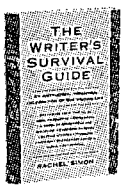
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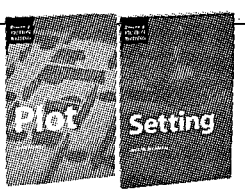
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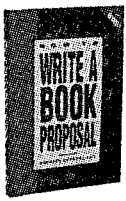
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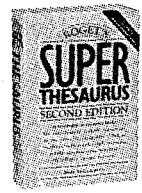
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CONTENTS



SHORT STORIES

PEACE TO HER BITTER BONES by Birney Dibble 8
SMOKY DIDN'T SEND ME by Charles Cutter 34
THE MUDSLIDE by Anne Weston 39
WWW.HEISTGAME.COM by Alan Gordon 57
THE BLUE MIRROR by David Edgerley Gates 72
BACON AND EGGS by David Cook 104
WELCOMING THE PADDY GOD by I. J. Parker 110

MYSTERY CLASSIC

TENNESSEE'S PARTNER by Bret Harte 131

DEPARTMENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES 4
THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH 71
UNSOLVED by Robert Kesling 101
SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED" 139
BOOKED & PRINTED by Mary Cannon 140
THE STORY THAT WON 141

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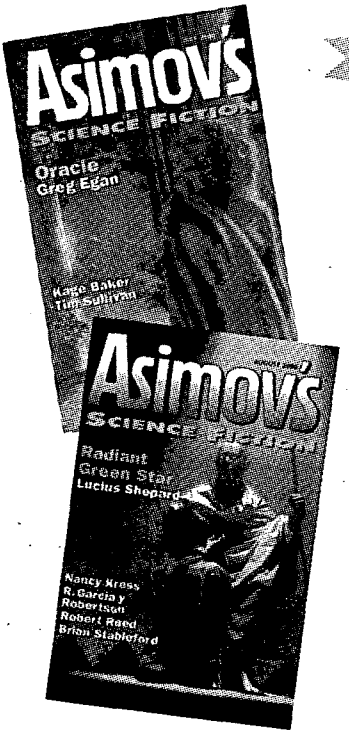
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

AHMM is happy to introduce three writers who are new to us in this issue, starting with Birney Dibble, the author of our cover story, "Peace to Her Bitter Bones."

Dr. Dibble, a general and chest surgeon, "served as an M.D. for fifteen years in Tanzania, Liberia, Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger, Belize, Honduras, and Ecuador, going where I was needed for as long as needed, three months to three years." He was in the marines in World War II and the Korean war and earned thirteen combat medals and ribbons. Author of more than twenty short stories, some fifty articles and essays, and three nonfiction volumes, he has also written three novels, most recently *The Taking of Hill 1052* (Northwest, 1995). He lives in Wisconsin.

The other two authors, Charles Cutter and David Cook, are seeing their first fiction publication here.

Charles Cutter, author of the clever and amusing "Smoky Didn't Send Me," is a Virginian transplanted from Missouri, attends a local business school, and writes fiction.

David Cook, author of the chilling "Bacon and Eggs," says his hometown is Long Beach, California. He

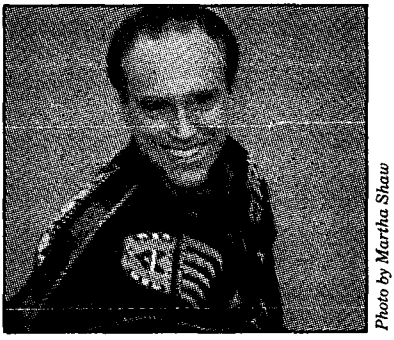


Photo by Martha Shaw

presently lives in Georgia, where he is an optometrist who works with dyslexic children. He has written seven professional articles and one book, *When Your Child Struggles:*

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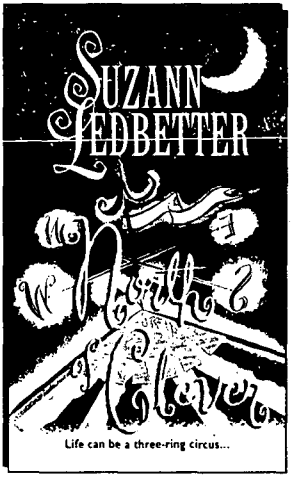
The Myth of 20/20 Vision. In 1998 he received the Optometric Editor's Award for Best Non-Technical Article.

Alan Gordon, author of "www.heistgame.com," isn't new to this magazine, but between his sixth story for us and this one he's become a novelist as well as a short story writer. His novels—*Thirteenth Night* (1999) and *Jester Leaps In* (2000)—are set in medieval Europe and star Theophilos the Fool. A third novel will be published by St. Martin's Minotaur in February. Two Theophilos short stories have appeared in EQMM, and his story "Digital Music," published in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* (September 1994), won their Readers' Award for Best Short Story. Since 1984 Alan has been a criminal defense lawyer with the Legal Aid Society of New York in both Manhattan and Queens.



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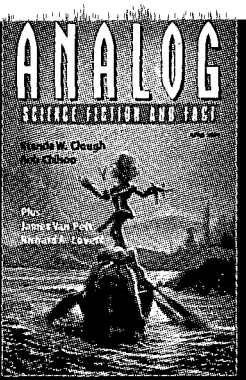
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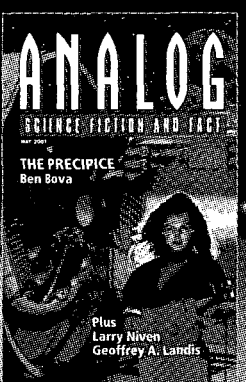
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Peace to Her Bitter Bones

Birney Dibble

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We learn, as the thread plays out, that we belong less to what flatters us than to what scars; so . . . peace to her bitter bones, who taught me the serpent's word, but yet the word.

Stanley Kunitz
THE DARK AND THE FAIR

I'd never seen a box full of human bones before.

The saltwater and its microorganisms had fully disarticulated them, so they lay in a jumble, ribs and vertebrae, leg bones and arm bones, foot bones and hand bones. But the pathologist from Guam Memorial Hospital had confirmed their origin and said the skull was that of an average-sized woman.

It had a distinguishing mark that the average woman does not have. A round hole in the left temple.

The box was an aluminum trunk, the kind you see tied up with hemp rope on the carousels of airports like Manila and Bangkok. It had been fastened with a Yale lock, which the local gendarmes had already sawed off.

I really didn't want to get mixed up in this. I was on vacation from my third floor office in the Third Precinct of the Chicago P.D. Sophia and I had come to the Western Pacific for a good long rest. I deserved it, and to tell the truth so did she.

But here I was anyway, in the air-conditioned office of Guam's chief of police, looking at bones. I'd made the mistake of dropping in on the chief for a few moments one day, just sort of snooping around. To see how the other half lived, you might say. Unfortunately, when they turned up this aluminum box, he remembered me. "Hey, Lieutenant Cellini," he said over the phone, "we got something I think you'd like to see."

And while I was driving my National rent-a-car down to the station house, he'd already gotten permission from his superiors in Honolulu to put me on the case "if I'd be so good as to give them a hand."

Police Chief Benjamin Tenorio stood silently in his brown uniform with the Sam Browne belt. He was Chamorro, of course, as are half the people on Guam and practically all the policemen and politicians. I didn't know a thing about his capabilities, but at least he wasn't too proud to call for help.

I put my little finger in the hole in the skull. It just fit. I looked up at Chief Tenorio. He smiled and said, "Yeah."

A big bullet had done that. Like a .45.

"What you got so far?" I asked as I sat down on a chrome and vinyl straight-backed chair. He settled his not inconsiderable bulk into the swivel chair behind a desk cluttered with manila folders, IN and OUT baskets, a bowling trophy, and the inevitable wife-and-kids photo taken at Disneyland. A U.S. flag stood in one corner and a Guam flag in another.

"The box," he said, "was found by two shellers . . ."

He saw my eyebrows go up and smiled at my ignorance. "People who look for shells." His smile widened. "Not *your* kind of shells, lieutenant. Beach-type shells, y'-

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know? Anyway, these two guys was snorkeling and found this box in only five feet of water. In Cetti Bay. We just had a big blow here, maybe you read about it. Typhoon Mary. We figger the box washed in from out deeper."

He showed me a map of the island. It's about thirty-five miles long and shaped like a boomerang, the upper half running northeast-southwest, the lower half north-south. Almost everyone lives on the west side at the bend of the island in half a dozen towns that once were Chamorro villages but now run together in an urban megalopolis. A coral reef surrounds the entire island, broken naturally in several places and by dynamite in a few others. There are dozens of bays with little sand beaches, dozens of points, miles of unpopulated beaches.

Tenorio tapped his middle finger on a little bay down the west coast about halfway between the capital city of Agaña and the southern tip of the island. "Cetti Bay," Tenorio said. "Two ways to get there. By boat and by a long trail from a road through the mountains." He sat back and folded his hands on his paunch. "Lieutenant . . ."

"Call me Mike."

"Okay, Mike." He waved his hand toward the box on the floor. "We know who this is—identified her by her dental records. And we think we know who did her in."

"So why d'you need me?"

His belly jiggled as he chuckled. "Two reasons, at least. First, we're not sure. Second, it'll be a cold trail. Very cold."

I almost said that anything cold on this steamy island would be welcome, but said instead, "Tell me."

He thumped an aging manila folder with his knuckles and said everything was in the file, but I took notes anyway.

He himself had not been involved directly with the case. He'd been a lieutenant then, not yet chief of police, and had been tied up with several other cases. So most of what he told me was from the files and from his unofficial recollections.

About seven years earlier Franklin and Betsy Underwood had sailed their thirty-eight foot ketch, the *Dorsal Finn,* into the Agaña boat basin. He was twenty-eight years old, two years out of dental school but had never practiced. When he graduated, his parents, Sam and Martha Underwood of Fresno, California, had given him money to set up an office, but he bought the ketch instead and sailed it to Hawaii. He bummed around there for a year, met Betsy, married her, and then the two of them hopped around the islands of the Western Pacific for another year before coming to Guam.

Betsy was twenty-nine and a very pretty woman. She'd been a social worker in San Francisco before taking a job in Hawaii. She loved living on the boat, even seemed to enjoy polishing brass and scrubbing decks. She changed the name of the boat from whatever it had been to *Dorsal Finn* because her parents, now dead, were Finnish. A neat play on words.

The Underwoods liked Guam and decided to make it their home

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base. Franklin was taken into a dental clinic, where he worked ten days a month. Betsy got a part-time job with GovGuam doing checks on food stamp applicants. They were soon accepted by the self-styled Beautiful People of Guam, of which there were a surprising number. The Guam Hilton Tree Bar was their watering place.

Sophie and I were staying at the Hilton, so we'd been out back in the Tree Bar several times. Really nice. The bar is built in and around a giant banyan tree. The tables are wrought-iron with glass tops. The waitresses are a mix of pretty little white girls who smile all the time and pretty little Chamorritas who never smile at all. You can sit and watch the swimmers and snorkelers and wind-surfers inside the coral reef that protects Tumon Bay from rough water.

Then one day the Underwoods and their boat disappeared. Their overturned dinghy was found floating in Cetti Bay, still tied to the sailboat's anchor rope.

Conclusion: they had sailed down the coast from the boat basin near Agaña to Cetti Bay, a distance of about twenty miles, just a couple of hours with a good wind. They had used the dinghy to scuba dive from. The dinghy flipped. They drowned. And their bodies were swept out to sea by the tide. And/or sharks ate them.

Problem: what happened to their sailboat?

Original conclusion: it had been carelessly tied to the anchor rope, pulled free in the strong afternoon winds, and drifted toward the Philippines fifteen hundred miles away. A navy search for it was unsuccessful, but that wasn't considered unusual in an area that big.

Final solution: the boat turned up in Hawaii several months later. Its figurehead and nameplate were gone, its original ivory white painted over in lavender. It was now the *Sand Dollar II*. The new name and the new paint job didn't keep it from being recognized by old hands along the waterfront where Dr. Underwood had hung out for almost a year.

The culprits were a couple who on Guam had gone by the names of Johnny and Becky Sampson. It turned out they weren't married after all and were identified as Robert Roberts and Kim Fields.

Roberts was a thirty-five-year-old soldier of fortune/beach bum type. Bushy, sandy hair, thinning on top. Full red beard. Dressed in blue-jeans and no shirt most of the time. Big and muscular.

Fields was a thirty-year-old white native of Pago Pago in American Samoa, tall and skinny, coarse-spoken, always dressed in a skimpy halter and skimpier shorts. "Could have been a nice-looking dame," Chief Tenorio said, "if she'd've washed her hair and put on a few pounds. And toned down her language."

They had limped into Guam waters in their leaky old sailboat, the *Sand Dollar*. Their auxiliary engine didn't work, so they had tried to sail her down the west side of the Paseo between the buoys at the entrance to the Agaña Boat Basin. "Now, hardly anyone does that," the

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chief said. And the Sampsons didn't. The wind shifted, flipped them, and up they went onto the reef. Crews of several boats helped them off the reef and towed them into the boat basin. One of their neighbors there was the *Dorsal Finn.*

Witnesses remembered them as hard-drinking, irritable no-goodniks shouting at each other and everybody else, especially their neighbors on the *Dorsal Finn.*

Roberts and Fields were apprehended in Hawaii, tried and convicted on federal charges of stealing the *Dorsal Finn.* They were both jailed, Fields for a year and Roberts for forty-two months because he already had a criminal record.

The problem now was to tie them to the disappearance of the Underwoods.

"And," I added, looking up from my notes, "don't forget that maybe they didn't do it."

"Yeah, there's that. But don't take bets against it. I've gone over the dockmaster's log from those weeks to see who else was parked there. Take my word for it—at least till you rule the 'Sampsons' out—that you wouldn't like any of those other people as suspects. Like, a sixty-year-old dermatologist and his thirty-year-old wife on a big old boat? Like a honeymoon couple in a forty-foot yacht scratching by on a hun'erd grand a year from Daddy? Like—well, hell, they're all like that."

"And you've haven't considered someone from shore—not a boat basin habitue at all?"

"The guards would have remembered anyone else."

"Have you talked to the dockmaster since these bones turned up?"

"Different one now. The other one's dead. Lost at sea on a fishing trip almost seven years ago."

"Right after the Underwoods disappeared."

"Yeah."

He was sure awfully damn interested in pasting the guilty label on Roberts and/or Fields. Well, that was only natural. Ask any cop. An unsolved case is a piece of chicken that's only half cooked. A solved case is a big piece of apple pie that goes down *so* easy.

I sighed and held out my slightly sunburned arms. "I haven't even got a tan yet, chief."

He grunted a short laugh. "Won't take you long to wrap this up, Mike. At least accordin' to what they say about you in Chicago."

"Like they say, flattery'll get you everywhere." I thought a minute. "Chief, there's a lot of things that bother me about this case, but the one that sticks out . . ."

I let the sentence dangle and Chief Tenorio filled it right in. "Yeah," he said, looking a little uncomfortable. "Why wasn't foul play considered at the time the Underwoods disappeared?"

I nodded.

"We got a pretty high crime rate here, but it's mostly riffraff vee-ess riffraff. Knifings outside bars, dopers muggin' sailors, fights in the massage parlors. Y'know? There wasn't no *reason* to suspect foul play when the Underwoods disappeared. Happens all the time. Guys fishin' from the rocks get swept off

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by a wave. Scuba divers drown. Boats flip. Stuff like that."

"Couldn't the Underwoods swim?"

He squirmed a bit. "Yeah, they could."

I let it lie. "But didn't anyone miss Roberts and Fields?"

"They was on their own boat when officers went down to the boat basin to talk to the people there. That's right in our files, Mike. And they stayed there for three days after the Underwoods disappeared. They never did get their engine fixed, but they waited for the right wind and sailed her out of the harbor. Nobody wondered where they went. No one cared. Good riddance, y'know?"

"So what they did was hide the *Dorsal Finn* somewhere, sail their own boat out to it, sink theirs, and take off in the new one?"

"That's what we figgered at the time."

I sat quietly for a minute. Pretty lax, I thought. *Some*body should have been a little suspicious. Maybe someone was but dropped it for lack of evidence. Well, I wasn't there, and I'd learned a long time ago not to judge anyone's work through the wrong end of the telescope. So I didn't push that any further. I should have.

"At the *time,* you said?"

"Yeah. We found the *Sand Dollar.* Somethin' like two years later. Many people as there are on this little island, you wouldn't think a boat could stay hid for two years. But there's lots of jungle nobody don't never go in. Like with Shoichi Yokoi, the Jap straggler. Maybe you read about him. He hid out right in the middle of the freakin' island from 1944 to 1972—twenty-eight years, Mike—before he got caught, thinkin' the war was still on or he'd get killed if he surrendered, or somethin'."

"Who found the boat?"

"Couple of kids."

"Names?" I had my ballpoint poised.

"Can't remember."

"Well, I'll get it from the files."

"Not there neither."

"Can you show me the boat?"

"Yeah. We left it right where we found it. In the jungle just off the beach from Late Point." He pronounced it Lah-tay Point.

"Wherever that is."

"North end of the island. Part of Andersen Air Force Base. Main reason it wasn't discovered. And Roberts and Fields had pulled it way up off the beach into the jungle with a block and tackle."

"Why'd you leave it?"

"Well, it's them people's even if they're crooks. And once they paid for their crime, they got the right to come back for it. Not worth much, anyway, way it is."

"Which reminds me. You got them picked up?"

"Oh yeah," he said with a grin. "He's still on Hawaii, but she went back to Pago Pago after jail. Short romance. They was pulled in, questioned, released. Nothin' to hold 'em for once they said they hadn't no information on the killings."

"Meaning they denied doing it."

"I ain't sure how the officers put it to them. But they'd have to know they was suspects."

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"Let's go look at the boat."

We went out to Tenorio's squad. It was only nine o'clock, but the car was like an oven. The chief said, "Give you a little tour of where America's day begins. Not very big, Mike, but the biggest land mass between Hawaii and the Philippines. You haoles say that Magellan discovered it. We Chamorros say it was here all the time." He slipped me a sly glance, and I could tell he didn't take that stuff too seriously.

We went north on Aspinall to Marine Drive and around the statue of Chief Quipuha to the boat basin. The basin was very small compared to those in Chicago, where thousands of boats are berthed. Here there were maybe twenty boats, a lot of them eighteen and twenty foot single-masted sloops, and a few power boats, very close together. Heavy surf was beating down through the buoys, and some kids were riding the boards in it. Not like the northeast beaches of Hawaii but better than nothing, I figured. I could see how it'd be awfully hard to sail a boat through that narrow opening without power, especially with that surf.

We went out to Marine Drive and northeast to Andersen Air Force Base. The guard waved us through. "We really oughta have a jeep for this next part, Mike."

We went past a B-52 parked on the grass, its engines replaced by mockups, its wingtips held off the ground by little wheels. Then I remembered why I'd heard of Andersen. It was from here that these flap-winged monsters bombed North Vietnam.

We were soon off the main base, in tangantangan scrub at first, then in real jungle, following a track that would have been hard for goats if there were any on Guam. The track ended, and Tenorio said, "We walk from here."

I was drenched from sweat in about five minutes. The chief was as cool as a mai tai. We stayed on a walking trail through tall trees hung with vines, down to the beach, along it for a few hundred yards getting hot white sand in our shoes, and then back into the jungle.

"There she is," Tenorio said.

It wasn't exactly a rotting hulk, but I could see why no one had stolen it and why the "Sampsons" hadn't come back for it. Pretty lines, though, even a landlubber like me could see that. *Sand Dollar* was still painted on its stern, black on white, or what used to be white. Below the name was printed KANEOHE, HI.

I don't know much about sailboats, but it looked about thirty feet long. I wouldn't want to be out in the open ocean in it, but I guess if you know what you're doing . . .

The mast had been taken down in order to drag the boat into the jungle. It lay alongside the boat. I wondered how one man and a girl would get it up where it belonged if they ever wanted to sail it again.

We went aboard and down into the cabin. It was a mess. Pots and pans and dishes and clothes were scattered everywhere. Chief Tenorio said, "We figger they pulled 'er up in a hurry and everything just tumbled out and around. Then when they took what stuff they

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wanted, they left the rest scattered like you see."

I rummaged around a little. There were several old pairs of shorts, faded and dirty bluejeans, an old yacht cap with a black visor and a grease-smeared top, some disreputable tennies without laces, cans of tuna and spaghetti, dirty kitchen and eating utensils, life jackets with the stuffing half out, a few yellowing paperbacks, dirty towels and washcloths, a rusty deep-sea fishing reel that would never function again, an old wooden cigar box that still had a couple of soggy joints in it, and a lot of other stuff that had no significance that I could see.

Even though I didn't know it at the time, one of those items triggered the solution to the case.

We drove back to the station house. The chief said, "Where you gonna start?"

"Your files."

"Yeah."

He got the envelope off his desk, and I took copies back to the Hilton. I put on my swim trunks and walked down to the beach, where I found Sophia flaked out on the beach, oiled down like a new gun, oversized sunglasses on her cute little nose hiding those big black eyes.

I'd picked her out of the mob at Crane Tech almost twenty years before, when Chicago's West Side was still Dago town and a guy like me had a choice of going into the mob or going into the police force. Sophie had helped me decide, and I owe her for it. She'd also done her PHT while I took two years of college at Loyola. She wanted me to go ahead and graduate, but I figured I already knew too many big words for a policeman.

She pointed now at the manila folder and said with mock anguish, "Mike!"

"You oughta be proud of your tall, skinny, blond, handsome husband. They asked for me special."

She giggled, more at my first sentence than the second because I'm about five eight, stocky-running-to-paunch, and as dark as an Italian can get in Chicago. As to handsome, there was a time, like about fifteen years ago when I was twenty, that I was goodlooking enough to catch a raving beauty like Sophia.

She went back to her paperback, and I studied the file. I didn't find much that Ben Tenorio hadn't told me.

There was one thing, though, that was interesting if not important. On the night before the Underwoods disappeared, the "Sampsons" had tried to patch up their running quarrel by taking over a cake that "Becky" had baked. Now, why would they do that? The only think I could think of was that they wanted to be welcome on the *Dorsal Finn,* and that certainly had implications.

I took the "island hopper" to Hawaii that night. It was a twelve hour flight with stops at Chuuk, Pohnpei, Majuro, and Johnston Island. I guess it's supposed to be an interesting experience to touch down at all those little atolls in the daytime. At night it was like landing in the water four times before

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circling Pearl Harbor and settling into Honolulu International.

I didn't waste any time. I checked in at the station house, found absolutely nothing of interest, and went looking for Robert Roberts, alias Johnny Sampson.

I found him at work in the Pearl Harbor yacht basin. I wouldn't have recognized him from the description Chief Tenorio had given me. He was clean-shaven, crew-cut, tanned, dressed in bluejeans that had been clean that morning and a T-shirt with a mahi-mahi on the front. He was forty-two, I knew, but he looked about fifty. He wore an old white yacht cap with a strange-looking emblem above the black bill. I'd seen that emblem somewhere before, but I couldn't place it right away.

He was standing on the gunwale of a monstrous sailing yacht, fixing the cabin-mounted horn. He glanced at me, pushed his hat onto the back of his head, went back to work, and said, "These damn things. Always filling up with salt spray and rusting out. Don't know why they can't tilt them down a little so the water runs *out*. You a cop?"

Honest people seldom recognize a cop in plain clothes. Crooks always do. I smiled my most enigmatic smile. "Yeah, I'm a cop. You a crook?"

He almost dropped his screwdriver. He recovered quickly and said, "Have been. Little stuff . . ."

"Like stealing a thirty-eight foot sailboat?"

"Paid for that. Straight now. Ask my boss."

"I'll do that." Later I did, and he had nothing but good to say about Roberts. Good worker. Honest. Maybe drank a little too much but on his own time.

"Can I come aboard?" I asked Roberts.

"Sure, if you don't mind me keeping on working."

I jumped aboard, and the boat hardly moved. I thought of the rowboats and canoes I'd owned when I lived in Allerton, Wisconsin. You didn't even stand up in them, much less jump in.

I didn't like looking up at Roberts, so I climbed up on the catwalk that ran around the cabin. The little-man's disease troubles me enough without spotting my adversary another three feet.

He glanced at me but kept on working when I flashed my badge. I laid everything out for him. Name. Rank. What I knew already. What I suspected. I didn't see any reason to pussyfoot with this guy.

He snorted. "The Hawaii Five-Ohs already been here."

We talked for the better part of an hour. He finished with the boat horn and started checking the attachments of the lines that steady the mast, whatever they're called. I didn't learn much, but there were a few things. He said he might go back for the *Sand Dollar* someday. No, he wasn't going back to Kim Fields. She was a total loss. It was her fault that they hadn't gotten along with the other boaters in the Agaña Boat Basin, her with her fishwife's mouth.

Yeah, he was a crybaby, but I had to admit his story sounded pretty

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straightforward once he saw that I was going to let him tell it his way, that is, without the bare bulb and the ring of shirtsleeved and tieless cops.

I began to doubt my own preconceived notions. Which was good. I'd come to Hawaii "knowing" that Robert Roberts was a murderer and I was going to prove it. That was bad. You got to have suspicions, you got to have leads, you got to work under certain assumptions. True. But you also got to keep an open mind. I learned that a long time ago.

He told me how they'd stolen the *Dorsal Finn.*

"Sure, we stole it. Kim's idea. Never should have let her talk me into that caper. But I was still halfway in love with her. She hadn't started to bug me yet like she did later on. I thought she was a down-to-earth gal with just enough rough edges to be interesting. An uncut diamond, you know?"

I nodded. I knew the type. "Go on."

"The Underwoods were real sailors, took their boat out two, three times a week. Most of those rich kooks just like to sit on theirs and drink their pitchers of martoonis and wave at the poor sons-a-bitches goin' to work. So we watched them, where they went, how long they stayed, like that. They went all around the island and, on good weather days, up the Marianas chain and once even to Chuuk. But one place they liked special and kept going back to, almost every week. Cetti Bay. What we did was, every time it looked like they were headed for Cetti, we drove down to Vista Point Overlook just above Umatac and watched them through binoculars.

"They had a routine. They parked the *Dorsal Finn* right smack-dab in the middle of the bay, jumped overboard without fins or snorkels, and swam to shore. Rested a minute, then swam back to the boat, had a beer and a sandwich, went down into the cabin, where we figured they made a little hay. At least, they were down there for an hour or more. Then they either snorkeled along the reef or sometimes they'd put on their scuba stuff and stay down seventy, eighty minutes."

He sat down on one of the fish-fighting chairs and swiveled it around so he could look at me. I sat down on the gunwale.

"The timing had to be perfect. They had to scuba, of course. The wind had to be offshore, and calm enough so we could follow their bubbles on the surface and know exactly where they were. I guess we ran down that mountain trail from the road a dozen times before they made a dive in the right direction when the wind was right.

"Finally they did. We swam out to the *Dorsal Finn* and boarded her. Kim ran up the jib while I pulled the dinghy around from the back and tied it to the boat's anchor rope."

"You didn't flip the dinghy?"

He turned to me and stared. "Why the hell would we do that? They had to have something to come up to from their dive."

He seemed so honest.

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He went on. "When the jib was set, I cut us loose from the anchor and let the wind swing us around to the south. We picked up speed slowly, but when we cleared the point, I ran up the mainsail—" he pronounced it *main*sail "—and away we went."

"Couldn't they see the boat leaving?"

"Visibility under water was about a hundred feet. That's a pretty big bay, and they were poking along the north point when we went around the south point maybe a couple of hundred yards away."

"What would you have done if they'd surfaced early?"

"If we were still anchored, we'd just say 'howdy' and make ourselves to home. People do that, you know, swim out to a boat they know and invite themselves to a drink or something."

"And if you were already under way?"

"We'd have had a problem."

"I think that's exactly what happened."

His face changed from a trustworthy chronicler of already forgiven crime to that of a petulant boy. "You don't believe me?" he said with a put-on whine. At that moment I hated him and relished the thought of personally kicking his butt into a life of ease at state expense.

"Okay," I said, "say all this is true. How'd you hide the *Dorsal Finn* while you sailed the *Sand Dollar* around the island to the beach off Andersen?"

"Great skill and cunning, my friend . . ."

"People not my friend don't call me 'my friend.' " He was turning nasty, and I was reacting to it. Not a good idea. Cool it, I told myself. "Just tell me your story, Roberts."

He saw the change in my attitude and, to give him credit, he changed his, too. He swiveled the chair so as to be facing aft. I got a good look at the emblem on his cap, and this time I recognized it: the dolphin emblem of the U. S. Navy submariners.

He went on.

"It was easy, actually. And depended on a lot of luck, believe me, lieutenant. We sailed the *Dorsal Finn* right into Umatac Bay, almost onto the beach 'cause there's no coral reef there. Anchored. Waded ashore. Hitchhiked back to the Cetti Bay Vista Point and picked up our car. Drove it to Agaña. Sailed the *Sand Dollar* around to Late Point and winched her up into the jungle. Walked down the beach till we were sure we'd cleared Andersen. Hitchhiked down the back side of the island to Umatac and sailed the damn *Dorsal Finn* to Hawaii."

"Nobody saw the *Dorsal Finn* in Umatac Bay?"

"Lotsa people must've. That was one slick idea Kim had: hide the damn boat where everyone could see it. Now, if someone who knew the Underwoods had found the dinghy in Cetti, then saw the *Dorsal Finn* in Umatac, they might've put two and two together. But nobody did."

I sat with my hands on my knees, studying him. With an important exception, it was pretty much the same story I'd read in the police

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files. There was also a startling omission that should have started me on a train of questions. But I missed it. Easy to do, miss an omission. I've done it before, I did it then, and I'll no doubt do it again someday.

"Where'd you do the repaint job?"

"Rota."

"Which is where?"

He looked at me like I'd flunked first grade.

I shot back, "Where's 5800 Maryland?" and looked at him like he'd flunked kindergarten.

He waved a hand in disgust. "Okay, okay. Rota's the next island north in the Marianas."

"You went straight across to Hawaii?"

"Yeah."

He was sure right about one thing: there had been a lot of luck involved. I'm not a sailor, but these guys who hang around boats all their lives learn to recognize hulls and riggings and stuff like that. Almost anywhere along their trip from Guam to Hawaii the boat could have been spotted. If they were well out at sea, no problem: they wave and stay away from whoever waves back. But they had to go into port now and then to get water and food. If someone had recognized the boat then—and fulltime sailors seem to be all over the Pacific—they wouldn't have had a chance.

But there was one hell of a big discrepancy between his story and the one Chief Tenorio had told me. I wasn't sure what the significance was, but Roberts didn't seem to be acting now as he sat mumbling to himself, his face flushed and the veins standing out on his forehead. "That was Kim's bright idea, too—going to Hawaii. Never, never, *never* should of gone to Hawaii with that boat. We'd still be sailing her if we'd gone to the Philippines or Bali or somewheres."

Dead end.

I tried a few more sallies, but there weren't any soft spots that I could see. He'd never owned an aluminum trunk and hadn't seen one on the *Dorsal Finn*. No way to check that out. I mentioned the marijuana we'd found on the *Sand Dollar*, but he merely shrugged. He was right: it was more trouble than it was worth to try to nail him for possession. He claimed a total blank when I tried to get the names of someone on Rota who'd seen them the day of the theft and therefore presumably the day of the murders. I could maybe sleuth around a bit on Rota if it came to that.

His grin was awfully close to a sneer when I hoisted myself off the gunwale and leaped to the dock.

I had several more stops to make. In Chicago I'd've jumped in the squad and driven maybe fifteen minutes or a half hour and I'd be where I wanted to be. But the Pacific is one big ocean. I wanted to get back to Chief Tenorio to see if I could clear something up. That was eight hours west nonstop and twelve hours on the island hopper. I wanted to go to Fresno to talk to Sam and Martha Underwood, Franklin's parents. That was four hours east. And of course I had to go down to American Samoa to talk

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with Kim Fields. That was maybe six hours south.

I chose Samoa and Kim Fields.

I checked into the Rainmaker Hotel late that same night. I think the traditional Samoan architecture combined with air conditioning and a phone would have pleased even Somerset Maugham, who immortalized the original rainmaker in the short story "Rain."

The next morning I found Kim Fields easily because she was listed in the phone book. The guy who answered the phone said, "No, sir, she's not here. May I take a message?"

"This is Lieutenant Michael Cellini of the Chicago police department on a special assignment. I'd like very much to see Miss Fields."

There was a slight pause, and I waited for the line to go dead. Instead he said, "Yes, sir. She works as a secretary in the administrative offices of the Plumeria Hotel." He was the assistant manager of the hotel, he said, was presently on night duty. He told me how to find the hotel and how to find Kim Fields.

Thirty-seven now, no longer as scrawny as Tenorio had described her, filled out in all the right spots, she was a very lovely young lady. She was dressed casually in an above-the-knee denim skirt, white blouse, and blue polka-dot bandanna at her throat. Her voice was modulated, didn't sound like a fishwife's at all. She had obviously made a real attempt to put her past behind her.

She didn't exactly roll out the red carpet. She made me wait until her lunch hour, and we met under a giant bougainvillea out on the hotel grounds. We sat on a very uncomfortable white metal-strip bench. She was as nervous as a hermit crab looking for a new shell.

I hit her over the head.

"We think you and your boyfriend killed Franklin and Betsy Underwood."

Her face reddened, then blanched. She held onto the edge of the bench like she expected to fall off. "God, no! We just wanted the boat."

"Which was stupid enough."

"I know."

"The Underwoods surfaced unexpectedly from their dive and caught you redhanded. So you shot them, pulled them aboard, put Betsy in an aluminum trunk. God knows what you did with Franklin."

All through this she sat staring at me, her fingers still gripping the seat, her mouth pursed and her head making little negative movements back and forth.

If I'd expected her to break down and tell me all, I was sadly mistaken. Tears came to her eyes and she could hardly talk, but she insisted that they had gotten safely away from Cetti Bay without the Underwoods' seeing them. Her story, as it slowly came out in the next half hour, was so similar to Roberts' that I could hardly help wondering if they'd rehearsed it.

Either that or it was true.

She confirmed that after they hid the *Sand Dollar* she and Roberts

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had walked down the beach behind Andersen Air Base, hitchhiked to Umatac Bay by way of Inarajan on the east side of the island, swam out to the *Dorsal Finn,* and sailed across to Rota that same day.

I asked her how long the *Dorsal Finn* lay at anchor in Umatac Bay.

"About six hours, maybe seven."

I still didn't tumble to a key clue that if inadequately explained would have proved that Roberts and Fields knew the Underwoods were dead and would have been strong circumstantial evidence that they had killed them.

It stood to reason that the police files were correct and these two people were lying. If Roberts and Fields were *not* on their boat in the Agaña Boat Basin for three days after the Underwoods disappeared, why would two police officers report that they were? On the other hand, it would've been more logical for them to get away from Guam waters as quickly as possible, whether or not they had done the murders.

I spent almost two hours with Kim Fields. She slowly calmed down, just as Roberts had, but I didn't get much more out of her. She admitted that it had been her idea to steal the sailboat. Going aground in full view of a couple of dozen people and having to be towed off the reef by total strangers had been too embarrassing for her.

I couldn't help taking the bait. "Why," I asked, "didn't you and Roberts get jobs and make enough money to fix your own boat rather than steal someone else's?"

"Never crossed our minds."

Well, she was honest about that, anyway. And that's why we've got cops, to deal with all the people who think like that.

"The files of the Guam police show that you and Roberts were on the *Sand Dollar* in Agaña Boat Basin for three days after the Underwoods disappeared."

"No, something's wrong there. We got the hell away from Guam just as fast as we could."

"You didn't go back to the basin after you stole the *Dorsal Finn?*"

"On the *Finn?* You crazy?"

"No, I mean on the *Sand Dollar.*"

"It was already hid up on Late Point."

Yeah, of course. She hadn't fallen into that trap. At least, if the rest of the story were true.

Another dead end.

Or almost. I was beginning to wonder about those files in Chief Tenorio's office. I left Kim Fields then and sat in my rental car looking at copies of the files. Was it my imagination or was the typing different where it said, "Sampsons interviewed on the first and third day after the disappearance of the Underwoods, on their boat the *Sand Dollar* in Agaña Boat Basin. Attempt to talk to them again on the fourth day disclosed that they had left for parts unknown the evening before."

The copies weren't very good, typical of copy machines in police stations everywhere. But the printing of those last two sentences did seem lighter. Maybe even done by a different typewriter? I stuffed the thought back down where it belonged, then reluctantly dragged it

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out again. The chief *had* seemed awfully anxious for me to nail Roberts and Fields. I'd attributed that to a normal desire to solve the case. Well, there were other ways to check out the true story if it turned out to be important.

I still wasn't really thinking of Tenorio or someone else in the police department in terms of murder suspects. Then I remembered that the dockmaster had disappeared at sea only weeks after the Underwoods vanished. Long after Roberts and Fields had left the island.

Adrenaline began to flow. If there's anything a cop hates, it's a bad cop.

I had to get back to Guam.

I also had to get to Fresno. I wasn't sure what I'd get from Franklin Underwood's parents. But there was that familiar gut feeling that I should talk to them. I'm no Sherlock Holmes, that's for sure, but I do agree with one of his big points: you get valuable insights into who did the murdering by learning as much as you can about who got murdered. And right now my best source of that would be Dr. Underwood's folks.

But Guam had to come first. I had to exorcise that devil—or face him—before I could go on with the investigation.

I flew to New Caledonia and picked up an Air Nauru flight to Guam. We went by way of Nauru, a speck in the ocean that everyone ought to see once in his lifetime. The island is ten miles in *circumference,* yet it has a GNP of one hundred fifty-five million a year, or twenty-one thousand dollars per person, mostly from the export of phosphates deposited over the ages by birds.

I got back to Guam in the late afternoon and grabbed a Guam-bomb taxi right to the Hilton. Sophia seemed happy to see me, and I quickly realized that my confrontation with Chief Tenorio was going to wait till the next day. They're absolutely right, those guys who write and sing about sleepy lagoons and tropical moons and two on an island.

Well, that's maybe two diversions too many: Nauru and love in the Hilton. But what the hell.

Chief Tenorio greeted me enthusiastically the next morning. "Hey, Mike, you gettin' to like this island life?"

"Give me a break, chief. I've only been gone three days."

I gave him a rundown on what I'd found but not much about what I thought. Then I finally had to say, "Chief, there's a discrepancy between your police files and the stories of both Roberts and Fields."

He chuckled, not at all disconcerted. "Well, then, I know which I'd believe."

I smiled. "Yeah, I know what you mean. But look here, chief." I showed him the police statement about interviewing the Sampsons on the first and third day after the Underwoods disappeared. Then I told him what both Roberts and Fields had said about leaving the island directly from Umatac Bay without ever coming back to the Agaña Boat Basin.

"Chief, I hate to say this, but I

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think Roberts and Fields were telling the truth."

He didn't like that. I didn't expect him to.

"Hell!"

"The officers who signed this part of the investigation are Dominic Sablan and Ed Gueske. Are they still around?"

"Gueske left the island three, four years ago, went back to the States far as I know. Sablan's off the force, fishing full-time." He took a deep breath. "We can talk to him once we find him."

"I think we better."

"Yeah."

"What do you remember about this one particular part of the investigation?"

"Not much. I wasn't really involved. I don't remember seeing the *Sand Dollar* in the boat basin after the Underwoods disappeared. But then I don't remember *not* seeing her."

"Wouldn't the dockmaster's records show whether or not she was still in port?"

"Yeah."

"Let's go."

It was only a two minute drive to the little shack out on the little peninsula that separates the two halves of the boat slips. It was a long two minutes. Our camaraderie was irreparably destroyed. It saddened me, but I couldn't help it.

The dockmaster, a shriveled up little Chamorro in spotless white pants and T-shirt, showed us the book. Chief Tenorio thumbed to the proper date, shuffled pages back and forth, looked up at me with a pained expression around his eyes.

"The pages for those three days are missing."

"Crap!" I said.

The dockmaster crowded over the chief's shoulder. "Torn out," he said. "Now who the hell . . ."

The chief slammed the book shut and tossed it on the dockmaster's desk.

We drove back to the station. The chief said, "I'll put out the word for Sablan. And I myself'll grill the son of a bitch."

"See if you can find what's-his-name . . ."

"Gueske."

"Yeah. Might not need him, but we should start looking."

"You bet."

Chief Tenorio tracked down Dominic Sablan. He had left the day before for the Northern Marianas, fishing, and wouldn't be back for a week. And Tenorio also found Gueske, in North Carolina. We agreed that I should go talk to him. So off I went again and put another strain on my internal clock with all those miles flying into the sun.

Gueske was a big, likeable guy, now working in the county sheriff's department in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. We sat in his back yard downing a few cool ones, and I've seldom liked a guy as quickly as I liked this big bear. I gave him a rundown on the new developments in the Underwoods' case. He listened intently, puffing silently on an old church-warden corncob pipe.

When I was through, he laid his pipe down on the ground, sat back in his big old rocker, and said, "Mike, there's two things you got to

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know right off. One is that I've always thought Chief Tenorio had something to do with the Underwoods' disappearance. The other is that Sablan and I filed a report that said we'd checked out the Agaña Boat Basin the day after the Underwoods disappeared and there was no sign of either them or their boat."

I said, "When did you find out your report had been changed?"

"About ten minutes ago."

"My God!"

"Yeah."

He puffed in silence, and I stared out across the back yard at a cat crouched on a low fieldstone wall running around the garden. I said, "How d'you explain that?"

"You can answer that."

"I want to hear you say it."

"Tenorio was shielding the Sampsons."

He was a thoughtful guy and slowly brought out his own theory.

"Tenorio's a complex man. He has this simmering dislike for people with money, who on Guam are mostly not Chamorros. I think he might well have helped the Sampsons steal the *Finn*. You know he was seen on their boat several times, having an after-duty beer?"

"God no. I sure didn't know that. But why would he be in with those people?"

"Two very good reasons. For the money they could get by selling the *Finn*. And to get back at the Underwoods for having such as easy life."

"You don't seriously think he had anything to do with the murders?"

He thought that over for a while. "No. Not really."

He wasn't very convincing.

"There's another thing," I said. "I think Tenorio knew all the time where the *Sand Dollar* was hidden."

"That's why he couldn't come up with the names of the two boys who he says found it."

"Yeah. They don't exist."

"One final point, Mike, that you seem to be overlooking." He looked a little sheepish, but he went on. "If the Underwoods were still alive, as the Sampsons claim, why didn't they raise the alarm while the *Dorsal Finn* was anchored all that time in Umatac Bay?"

I thought that over all the way back to Guam. And decided to take the Sampsons off the hook and put Chief Tenorio on it. Seven years ago he's a lieutenant in the Guam police department. But he's also a Chamorro, and he spends a lot of time down at the waterfront watching the fishing boats come in with catches of mahi-mahi and wahoo and an occasional tuna. Watching the yachts and big sailboats come and go. He gets to know the Underwoods, maybe even has a Heineken on the fantail once in a while. Even though they're friendly, they treat him with a little too much condescension, almost certainly without realizing it. On his police pay he can hardly afford a rowboat, and here Franklin Underwood has a thirty-eight foot ketch handed to him on a silver platter.

Tenorio begins to brood and finally lets his bruised ego take over. He has free access to the boat basin and the dockmaster's log. After all,

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the question posed in my police academy classes on internal security is still valid: *"Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?"* Who guards the guards? The answer is, usually, nobody. At least until it's too late.

Tenorio enlists the "Sampsons." They are all too willing to steal the *Dorsal Finn* with what amounts to police protection.

None of them wants the boat. They want the money it'll bring, even on a quick sale. Tenorio says he can get all the necessary papers to prove ownership, etc. The Sampsons never had it so good. Away they go.

Tenorio drives the Sampsons to the Cetti Bay overlook and waits while they run down the mountain to the bay. He watches through binoculars as they board the *Dorsal Finn* and start out of the bay. As they round the south point, the Underwoods surface prematurely and see their boat headed out into the Philippine Sea. Tenorio is sure they've recognized the Sampsons. He knows that if the Sampsons are caught—and they will be—they'll sing and that'll be the end of Tenorio's blossoming career.

He watches as the Underwoods swim to their dinghy, dump their dive gear into it, paddle rapidly to shore, and scramble up the path towards the overlook where he is standing. He goes back down to his car, then just happens to be passing when the Underwoods come up the path. He gives them a ride, murders them, and goes down to Umatac to pick up the Sampsons. Maybe he tells them about the bodies, maybe he doesn't. Yes, he has to. He gives them a ride to the Agaña Boat Basin. They take off in the *Sand Dollar,* and he goes by car up to Late Point to pick them up after they've hidden their boat. He gives them a ride back down to Umatac, where they board the *Dorsal Finn* and sail her off to Hawaii, stopping off in Cetti Bay to dispose of the bodies and tip over the dinghy.

Tenorio waits until the minimal investigation is over, then adds a couple of sentences to the police files and tears the pages out of the dockmaster's log. Yeah, I thought as I finally fell asleep, it could have happened that way.

As usual, my plane hit the soggy air of Guam at about one A.M., so I didn't get to the station house until almost ten o'clock. The chief was at his desk, flipping pages in a report. He didn't look too happy to see me, and I wondered if he were worried about what Gueske had told me.

He was. I could tell that when he jumped right on it, "Learn anything interesting from Gueske?"

I looked at him as if I'd never seen him before, a genial, competent cop, father of six, good husband, all that stuff. A killer? But I had to go right at it, and I did. "Chief, Gueske seemed to think you might have had something to do with the theft of the Underwoods' boat."

He laughed, that deep belly laugh of his. "I thought he might say something like that."

"He said you were down on the Sampsons' boat a lot."

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"You know why? Because I got reports of *Gueske* being over there lots of times, in civvies, and money was changing hands. Drugs, Mike, drugs. Gueske was dealing, along with Sablan, but we could never prove it. And it was Gueske, not me, who helped the Sampsons steal that damn boat."

"Why the hell would he do that?"

"Blackmail, Mike, blackmail. The Sampsons threatened to blow the whistle on those two guys unless they helped steal the boat."

I thought over my interview with Gueske just the day before. He had seemed so honest.

Not a false bone in his body. One of these two cops was lying.

"When the Sampsons were picked up for stealing the boat, did they incriminate Gueske or Sablan in any drug dealings?"

"No, 'course not. Or I'da had all of 'em up on charges."

My head was swimming. Was it on straight? Talk about coverups. Watergate, Whitewater, Filegate, here I come.

We talked for another hour, and I couldn't shake him. Finally I said, "I'm going to Fresno tonight."

"Okay, Mike," was all he said.

I did leave that night. Seven hours to Hawaii. Four hours to 'Frisco. I slept off and on, but the conflicting stories I'd heard kept waking me up. It was a mess.

I rented a car at the San Francisco airport and drove across to Oakland and down the San Joaquin Valley to Fresno. Two related questions bothered me: if Chief Tenorio had been guilty, would he have welcomed a Chicago homicide detective to the investigation? Or would he have been so sure his tracks were covered that he wasn't worried?

The Underwoods actually lived out on the Kings River near Piedra in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas. Pretty spot. Their house was an almost new log ranch perched on a hillside that sloped gently down toward the river to the north and up sharply into the mountains to the south and east. There was a white horse-fence enclosing a lush green paddock where two sleek brown horses grazed. They didn't build that for a few nickels, I thought.

Sam Underwood was a tall, lanky, bald man with a close-cropped white beard and mustache, about sixty-five or a little older, but he moved with the easy walk of an outdoorsman. He wore tooled leather boots, brown Levi's, a brown and yellow yoked shirt, and a string tie. The tie slide was two silver dolphins. He said he was retired navy.

"Submarines, sir?" I asked with a smile.

He tapped his tie-slide. "You're very observant, lieutenant."

"Gumshoes are supposed to be."

He smiled. "So was my older son." Meaning his son had been a submariner, too.

Martha Underwood was a plump grandmotherly type, greying hair pulled back alongside her face and held in a bun by two silver pins. She was working in a flowerbed behind the house and was dressed in dusty tennies and a cotton housedress that had seen lots of sun.

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We sat in a little nook off the living room, where an old fashioned bay window flooded the room with yellow light and looked out over the slope to the river. The Underwoods were eager to talk and even more eager for information. No one had come to talk to them since the recovery of their daughter-in-law's body almost a week before. Mrs. Underwood was a bit petulant about that. I didn't blame her.

But I said, "There really isn't much to tell you yet, ma'am. We're still in the very early stages of the investigation."

"But it really—was—*murder?*" She almost whispered the last word.

I nodded. "There's a bullet hole in Betsy's skull."

She shuddered, and Sam Underwood got up and laid a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him with bright shining blue eyes and then turned to me. "I'm okay," she said. "It's just . . . just . . . you know, lieutenant."

"I do know."

"But this . . . murder . . . it took place *seven years* ago."

"Yes, but it wasn't thought to be murder until just a week ago."

Sam snorted. "Whose fault is that?"

"I don't think you can fault anyone, sir. I've talked to Chief Tenorio at great length, and apparently there just wasn't enough evidence at the time to seriously consider foul play."

I went on to tell them as much as I could about my interrogation of Roberts and Fields. I didn't say anything about the problem with the police files, or about my scenario involving Ben Tenorio. "Those two are our chief suspects, but there's no real proof yet that they did it."

We talked for a couple of hours, and I began to wonder just why I'd come all this way. They knew nothing about the murders, knew nothing about Roberts or Fields, had never been to Guam or any of the other places in the Pacific where their son and daughter-in-law had spent the last three years of their lives.

"He made us as mad as hell when he spent the money we gave him to buy a sailboat," Sam said. "But we got over that. Decided it hadn't been fair to put strings on the money in the first place. Pure rationalization, of course." His smile was rueful as he added, "Then he got married without telling us, and we didn't meet her for six months or so because they were wind jamming around the Pacific and 'didn't have time' to come home. Can you imagine?"

We talked about that for a while and then I said, "Where is your other son, the one who was in subs?"

Martha sucked in her breath, pulled herself up from her chair, and brought a picture from the bedroom. It showed a happy pair of sailors with their arms draped over each other's shoulders, both of them with the dolphin insignia on the left breast. "This is a picture of Terrence and a friend just after he finished his training at New London. He went to Vietnam. He never came back."

I nodded my head and looked up at Sam. There was a faint red line

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around the edges of his eyes. I said, "He looks a lot like you, sir."

"Yeah. They both did. Martha, get that picture of Terry and Frank we took when Terry was home on leave."

She brought an enlarged black and white showing Terry in his dress blues and Frank in flared white pants, striped yachting shirt, and a visored yachting cap.

"They sure do look like . . ." I stared at the picture. Franklin Underwood's cap was white and had a dolphin emblem just above the short black visor. I knew where I'd last seen that cap. Or was it just coincidence?

Martha Underwood was looking at me with a rather bemused smile. "What do you see, lieutenant?"

"That cap Frank is wearing. Where'd he get it?"

Sam said, "Terry bought the cap somewhere along the Mediterranean coast of France. Couldn't wear it in uniform, but it caught his eye and he bought it and gave it to Frank just before he—Terry—went to Vietnam."

"Why do you ask, lieutenant?" Martha asked.

"One of our suspects, the guy Roberts, was wearing a cap just like it. With the dolphins."

"My God," Martha said, and collapsed in a chair. Sam sat forward in his chair and said, "Frank would *never* have given that cap to anyone. He practically worshipped his older brother and wore that cap like a uniform, even in the house when he was in high school."

"Roberts could have gotten the dolphins in any Army-Navy store in Hawaii," I said, playing the devil's advocate, "and sewn them on his own cap."

"Not that cap, lieutenant," Martha said. "Look at it. It's got a definite European cut to it. You find them in the States, but you've got to look pretty hard."

"Do you have a negative of this picture?"

"Probably. Somewhere. But take the picture if you want."

"If you're sure." I slipped the cardboard off the back, extracted the picture, and put it in my briefcase. Yeah, I'm one of those briefcase-toting detectives. I can't keep everything in my head like Commander Gideon or even little old Miss Marple.

Martha said, "If you can get the cap itself from—what's his name? Roberts?—you can see if Franklin's initials are on the inside of the sweatband."

"That's right, lieutenant." Sam laughed. "Frank used to make quite a bit out of his initials. F.U."

"Samuel!"

We had a very pleasant lunch on the cedarwood deck, looking down over the rolling hills to Kings River. We didn't say much more about the murders. I think they felt that I'd nailed things down pretty well. I knew I hadn't. Figured things out, finally, but not nailed anyone down.

As I drove up the San Joaquin Valley, I thought to myself, now what? I also apologized to Chief Tenorio for suspecting him of such a heinous crime as premeditated murder. He really didn't look the type, but how often have I said that to myself as I turned the screw?

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So now what?

The weak link was Kim Fields. She was truly rehabilitated, not all that common even these days. She had washed her hair and like the Mayfair lady had learned to speak. It had paid off. She had a respectable job. She was living with the assistant manager of one of the bigger hotels in American Samoa. She was approaching middle age, or at least the end of youth, which may be saying the same thing.

At the airport I called Sophia and apologized for taking ten days instead of two to solve a simple case of a box of bones. As I slid into my seat on the plane, I contemplated the fact that for thirty-five years I'd lived a satisfactory life without ever seeing American Samoa. Now I was going there for the second time in a week.

It was late afternoon when I once more sucked in the hot humid air of a Pacific island. I headed right for a phone when I'd flashed my badge at the customs guy and he passed me through with an indifferent wave of his hand.

She was home. She was not at all happy to hear my voice. I had to invite myself over.

"I'd send my boyfriend on an errand if I were you, Miss Fields."

"He's not here."

We sat out on the little lanai, screened from the house next door by red and lavender bougainvillea. Kim Fields was a knockout in very short white shorts and a halter rig that just barely did what it was supposed to.

Just like the first time, I hit her over the head. "I've got what I consider proof that you and Roberts did in the Underwoods."

She bit her lower lip and waited for me to go on. No impassive denials this time. She must have been waiting seven years for this moment.

"I've got a picture here." I fished the picture of Terry and Frank Underwood out of my briefcase and put my finger on the cap on Frank Underwood's head. "I saw that cap on your boyfriend's head just a few days ago."

She made one last attempt to put off the inevitable. "That doesn't prove anything."

"It will when I get the cap and show Chief Tenorio the initials F.U. in the sweatband."

That got to her. She stopped breathing for a moment. Her fingertips went uncontrolled to her lips. Her eyes turned instinctively toward the phone on the table just inside the lanai door.

I shook my head. "It's too late, Kim. I've already sent the Hawaiian police out to pick up Roberts and the cap." I hadn't, but she didn't need to know that.

She got up and went into the house. I watched her, but without any real concern that she might try something. She got a tissue from the bathroom and came back out. She wiped her eyes and looked at me with all the fight gone out of her.

"I pleaded with him, lieutenant. Begged him, practically on my knees, not to kill the Underwoods. They hadn't ever done anything to us. They didn't deserve to die just so we could steal the boat. I wasn't

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much then, lieutenant, I know that." A tiny hint of a smile showed through the tears. "Not much *now,* come to think of it. But *some*thing. Anyway, even then I didn't want any part of murder. I'd rather have taken my chances on jail than seeing those nice people dead. He wouldn't listen. I think he was half crazy by then. And he already had a police record. I didn't. He shouted at me, 'I'll get ten years next time.' Betsy Underwood was lying on her side on the deck at our feet, still in her scuba rig. Bob had tied Frank to the mast. We were drifting towards the reef. Betsy pushed up on one elbow and said, 'Johnny—' she knew him as Johnny Sampson '—we'll forget this whole thing ever happened if you just let us go and get off the island by tonight in your own boat.' "

Kim stopped, unsure of just where to go next. She'd lived with this thing for seven years. I had to believe she was telling the truth now. I wanted to believe it.

"But Johnny Sampson wasn't about to let them go," I prompted.

"He raised the pistol or automatic or whatever you call it and pointed it at Betsy. I screamed. He fired. Hit her in the head. Frank was yelling and fighting his ropes. Bob walked over, slugged him with the butt of the gun, jerked his cap off and put it on his own head. And then shot him, too."

She leaned forward on her knees, literally tearing at her hair, sobbing uncontrollably. I had seen this too often to be overcome, but I hadn't seen it often enough to be nonchalant. I watched her for signs of an act. I've gotten pretty good at that, too. The actor will prolong the scene just a bit too much, will carry the histrionics a bit too far.

She didn't.

Her sobbing slowly subsided. She wiped her face. Sat back in her chair. Finger-combed her hair. Said, "That's what you wanted, isn't it, lieutenant?"

I nodded, and said, "The aluminum trunk . . ."

"Underwoods'. Bob dumped Betsy in it and locked it. Poked a couple of holes in it with Franklin's dive knife so it'd sink. Added ten or fifteen pounds to Frank's weight belt." She sucked in a mouthful of air. "Threw them overboard when we got outside the bay. Sailed down to Umatac and left the boat. The rest of the story I told you is all true."

A sudden wave of insight washed over me like a twenty foot wave. Mentally I slapped my forehead. Of course! They could leave the *Dorsal Finn* in Umatac Bay for six or seven hours because they knew the Underwoods were incapable of spreading the alarm. I remembered then that Roberts had said, "If anyone found the dinghy in Cetti Bay and then saw the *Dorsal Finn* in Umatac Bay, etc. . . ." That's when I should have tipped to the scene. All I had ask him was, "If you left the Underwoods alive, why didn't they spread the alarm?" He couldn't have answered that question, and I would have had him. I blew it.

"You were into drugs, too?"

She nodded.

"With Gueske and Sablan?"

She looked very surprised.

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"How'd you get onto that? Yes, that's how we got them to help us. They picked us up at Umatac."

"Okay, did Gueske know that Roberts had killed the Underwoods?"

"Of course. Bob had blood on his clothes and on his hands. I will say this, Ed Gueske was truly horror-stricken. I've never seen a man so disturbed and still be able to function. He sat down on the ground, then rolled over and puked."

"But he still gave you a ride back to your truck?"

"Lieutenant, he was in this up to his ears by now. He really didn't have a choice."

There was lots more to talk about, but it can all be summarized in a few words. She agreed to go down to the local station, where I read her her rights and took her formal statement. She was relieved, almost childishly so, to have the monkey off her back. I told her early on that she might get off pretty light if she stuck with her story and if the jury believed it. But I didn't make any foolish promises.

While she was telling her story to the grumpy court reporter, I called the P.D. in Hawaii and asked them to pick up Roberts and to be sure they got his yacht cap. I laughed at the pained, "His *what?*" and explained enough so that they would realize the importance of it.

Then I called Chief Tenorio and found him at home. He was effusively apologetic because he'd found Dominic Sablan and had indeed grilled the hell out of him. Sablan had finally admitted that he'd doctored the records for a couple of reasons; it seemed the only thing to do at the time. One, he wanted to prevent any accusations of laxness in the investigation of the Underwoods' disappearance. And two, he was covering up the little cocaine ring he had been in with Gueske and the Sampsons. Yes, Gueske had torn the pages from the dockmaster's log. Yeah, they'd known what they were doing but it seemed the lesser of two evils. And it was also the main reason both of them had left the force.

I didn't ask the chief if he himself had had anything to do with the records. I'd already developed an entire scenario in which the chief was the murderer, and anything less would have been anti-climactic.

I also didn't say anything more about the missing dockmaster. I had to assume now that he really had drowned accidentally.

Three months later Robert Roberts and Kim Fields were brought to Guam and tried separately for the murder of Betsy Underwood. Without the "corpus delicti" the D.A. hesitated to try them for the murder of Dr. Franklin Underwood. "Getting them for one murder ought to be enough, don't you think, Mike?"

The mostly Chamorro jury and the Chamorro judge gave Roberts life in the penitentiary. Which meant he would be out in thirteen years or so if he were a good boy. They gave Kim Fields three years for complicity, but the judge believed her story—as I had—and commuted her sentence to time already served followed by probation and parole for three years. She had

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a raft of character witnesses from American Samoa, including the manager and the assistant manager of the Plumeria Hotel. She also had long tanned legs and a beautiful smile.

I had to go out for the trial, of course. Sophia went with me. She'd lost most of her tan back in Chicago. I'd never gotten one. Didn't get much of one this time, either, having to be in court most of the day. Next time I go to the Pacific for a vacation I'm going to Nauru. In the mornings I'm going to dig a little phosphate. In the afternoons I'm going to lie on the beach, go swimming and snorkeling.

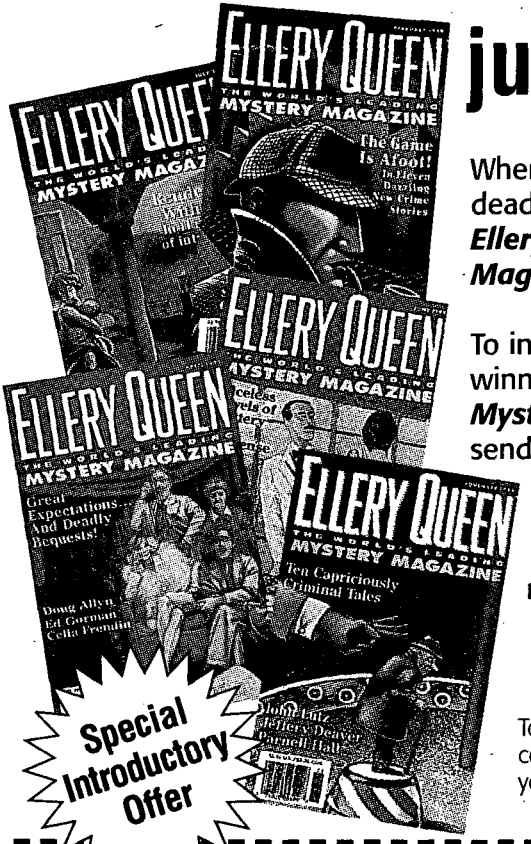
And maybe find another box of bones.

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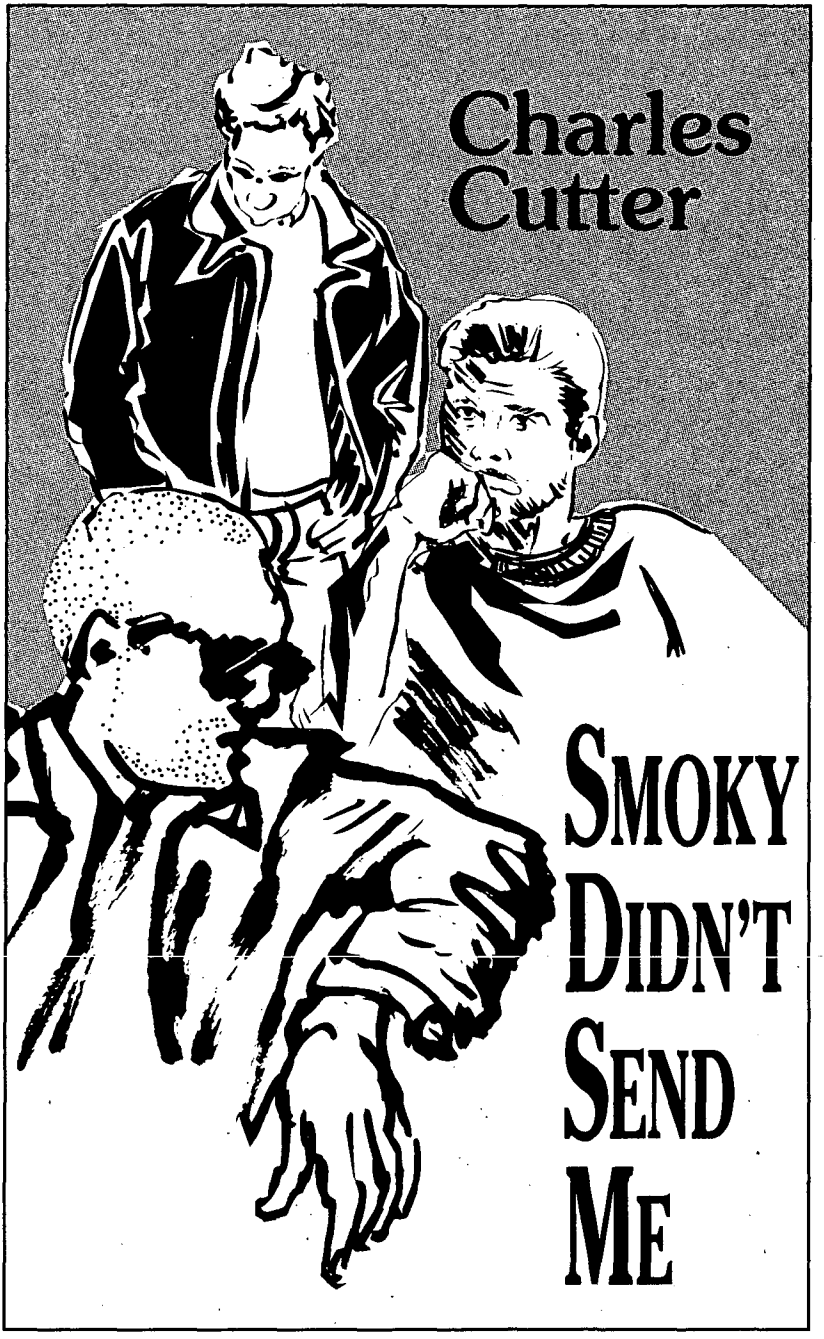
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Fumbling for my keys, I could hear the shouting and cursing in my living room right through the front door. The television, I figured; probably my wife watching one of the *Lethal Weapon* movies. She's a big Mel Gibson fan; it's almost embarrassing the way she looks at him.

As I awkwardly entered the house—trying to free my keys, clutching my briefcase, easing the door shut with my left foot—my eyes caught not one but three lethal weapons. All in the hands of three intense young men—kids to me, for not one looked over seventeen. Two of the weapons were pointed at me; the third was trained on my wife Laurie and our seven-year-old daughter Anna, both sitting on the sofa.

Well. Not exactly the homecoming I'd expected.

I halted all movement (a matter of request and instinct), and as I stared, I quickly organized the scene in my head. The closest one to me—tall, thin, unshaven—I dubbed Scruffy. The one in the middle, similar in appearance but for a cleanly shaved head, him I tagged Muffy. The third one, the one pointing a gun at my family, reminded me of the drawings I'd seen of Neanderthal man. I named him Bob, for no good reason. Bob held my wife's open purse in his non-gun hand, its various contents spilled on the floor in front of his feet. I noticed he was standing on her hairbrush.

I was instructed (expletives deleted, here and throughout) to move slowly and finish closing the door. I complied. Except for ragged breathing and some crying sounds, my wife and daughter were silent—not even a "Welcome home, honey/Dad"—and appeared unharmed. Their eyes were red and wet and showed more fear than I'd ever seen in a human being.

"Now drop the case," Scruffy said.

Again I complied, lowering it gently to the carpet.

"Tie him up," said Muffy.

"Tie 'em *all* up," Bob encouraged. His wild eyes glistened.

"Get your hands behind your head," Scruffy shouted. "Lie on the floor. Now!"

My compliance ended. My motions were slow but ran contrary to instructions. I held my hands out in front of me, palms down, as if addressing the board of directors. I was a businessman, and this was business.

Scruffy was the spokesman, so I addressed him.

"I've been waiting at the warehouse for you guys for over two hours. Why the hell did Smoky send you to my house?"

Since Muffy was also pointing a gun at me, he felt he had the right to contribute, essentially repeating Scruffy's orders.

My voice was firmer, showing irritation. "I want to know why Smoky sent you to my house, dammit." I cautiously tilted my arm, checking my watch. "It's almost nine. You're supposed to be in Crystal River by ten."

Bob's head was twisting back and forth between Scruffy and my fam-

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ily. He looked confused. "What's he talkin' about, JoJo? What the hell's he talkin' about?"

Okay, so Scruffy was JoJo. I liked Scruffy better, but I'm flexible.

"What the hell you talkin' about?" JoJo demanded.

"For the last time," I said, "you were supposed to meet me at the warehouse. The *warehouse*. Why did Smoky send you here?" My voice showed anger: "And why are you pointing a gun at my family? For that matter, why are you pointing a gun at *me?*"

JoJo blinked slowly in confusion. "You crazy or something? Smoky didn't send me. Don't know no Smoky. Get on the floor!"

I returned his confused blink. "Smoky didn't send you?"

"Don't know no Smoky."

I laughed, but it took a little effort. "So—what? You're just three burglars—robbers—housebreakers? Is that it? This is just a big coincidence?"

"Get his wallet," Muffy suggested.

"And his watch," Bob added.

"Gimme your wallet," JoJo said. "And your watch."

Oh, they were quite a team.

I slowly took a few steps across the room, heading for my favorite chair, peripherally noting that the two pistols followed my movement.

"Stop walking!" JoJo shouted, adding a vulgar and (in *my* opinion) inaccurate noun.

"Calm down," I told him as I eased into my recliner. "I'm thinking."

Muffy muttered a string of epithets, obviously perturbed by the turn of events.

"Let's talk some business," I suggested. "What do you guys make on a job like this? I mean, on the average?"

Bob continued staring—and pointing his gun—at Laurie and Anna, but his words were directed at JoJo. "What's all this? What's goin' on? What's he *mean?*"

"I'm going to guess a few hundred," I offered. I doubted if they'd ever done a cost analysis of their efforts. "If you're lucky, a thousand. How'd you guys like to split five thousand between you?"

Muffy's eyes lit up; his weaponed arm extended farther in my direction. "You got five thousand? Cough it up!"

I settled back in the chair, stretched out my legs. "I don't have it *here,*" I told them. "You have to go pick it up."

JoJo squinted. "Pick it up?"

I laced my fingers together over my stomach and began tapping my thumbs. "Listen, I was supposed to meet some guys tonight. They were going to do a job for me. But they didn't show up. I come home and here *you* are—so now I figure, what the hell, this could work out."

Muffy turned to JoJo; he didn't like the sound of it. "I don't like the sound of this."

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"Shut up." JoJo stabbed his pistol in my direction. "Keep talking."

"You got a car?"

"A car?"

I sighed. "A car. Do you have a car?"

"Yeah. We got a car."

"All right. Pay attention, 'cause we don't have much time. You guys take a packet I've got—it's in my briefcase—up to Crystal River. An hour's drive straight north on highway 19. The Riverside Hotel, on the left side of the road, you can't miss it. One guy stays in the car—keep the motor running—two guys go up to Room 214. Got that?—Room 214. Just knock, don't say a word. Door opens, you go inside. A man will hand you an envelope. You open it, count it right there, five thousand dollars. Then you hand the man the packet I give you. You leave. That's it. You keep the money."

Bob: "JoJo?"

"Shut up. I'm thinking."

"It's good for you, it's good for me," I assured them; then I sought to close the deal. "If you guys do this, if you're dependable, I've got other deliveries for you. Couple of times a month, sometimes more."

JoJo's head was tilted. "Five thousand? Cash?"

"Five thousand. Cash."

His eyes narrowed. "What do we deliver?"

"A packet," I said again. "A manila envelope. And you don't open it. What's in it won't help you—it's nothing you can sell—but if you open it, they won't give you the money." I stood up. "And if you open it—" it was my turn to narrow my eyes "—*I'll* find you."

I crossed the room, noting that the pistols still followed me but not as insistently. They let me pick up my briefcase and snap it open without comment; they were becoming as compliant as new employees. I rifled through the briefcase and brought out the aforementioned packet, holding it in the air.

"It has to be delivered by ten o'clock. Ten fifteen at the latest; after that, they'll figure something's wrong and take off."

JoJo's eyes shifted in contemplation. Muffy was now staring at him instead of me.

"JoJo? Whaddaya think?"

"Five thousand dollars," JoJo repeated. He lowered his arm, and his gun, to his side; a decision had been reached. He crossed the room in three steps and snatched the packet from my hand.

"Riverside Hotel," he said, impressing me with his retention ability.

"Room 214," I added.

Muffy followed JoJo's lead, lowering his pistol. "Five thousand dollars!" His smile was more frightening than the gun.

"Let's go," JoJo ordered. Bob's revolver was the last to withdraw; my family was no longer under gunpoint.

I escorted the three boys out of my house and down the block to where

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their car was parked, issuing instructions and cautions along the way. "Don't speed, but don't go too slow. Don't draw attention to yourselves. Don't say a word when you get to the hotel, you won't need to." I turned to JoJo. "I'll need to get in touch with you next time there's a delivery. I need a phone number."

JoJo obliged with his mother's number. "Will you be calling me? Or will it be Smoky?"

Good question. "Probably Smoky. And remember—from now on we meet at the warehouse. Never at my home."

JoJo nodded. Bob climbed into the back seat of their car, looking vaguely disappointed. Muffy took the wheel, and JoJo sat next to him, clutching the manila envelope. The car started, moved forward a couple of yards, lurched to a stop. JoJo rolled his window down, stuck his head out.

"Where's the warehouse?"

An even better question. "Smoky will give you directions when he calls."

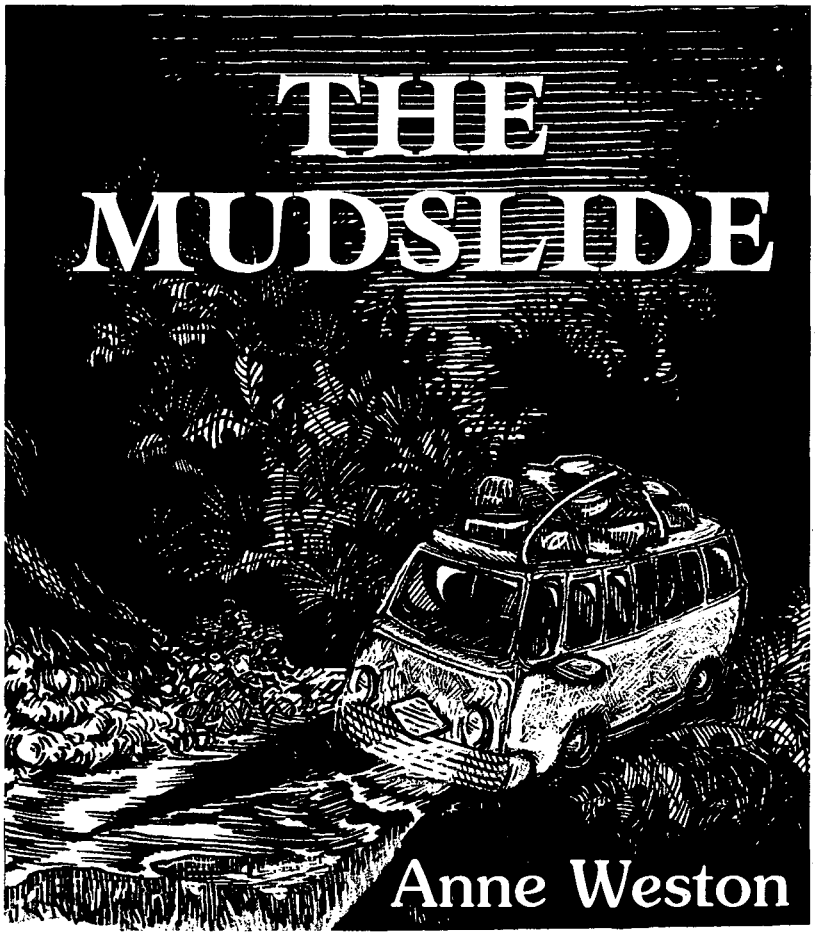
JoJo gave me a thumbs up, and the car took off. I waved goodbye.

Well. That was that. I went back inside, comforted my wife and daughter, and called the sheriff's office. I told the officer the make and license plate number of the getaway car; he assured me they'd have the Crystal River police waiting at the Riverside Hotel in plenty of time. He told me that the packet (containing the quarterly profit and loss report for my medical equipment company) would have to be held as evidence. He also suggested, several times, that I must be some kind of lunatic.

All's well that ends well, I guess, but there's always a price to pay. My daughter was angry that I'd appropriated the name of her rabbit, Smoky. My wife was upset that I'd sent the little hoods to the same hotel room where we'd recently spent our second honeymoon, but she got over it. (On the other hand, she never has gotten over her concern about my being able to lie so convincingly.)

Still, I have to admit that, for a little while after the incident, she looked at me differently—almost, but not quite, the way she looks at Mel Gibson.

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The purple bus eased into the turn. Its passengers, packed tight as kernels on a corncob, held their breath.

Thud. Clunk. The bus's fender fetched up against the high inside corner of the dirt road's curve.

The passengers sighed.

"Everybody out," announced the rotund driver, leaning back in his seat. He grabbed a guava-filled pastry from a bag and stuffed half in his mouth. "The bus will make the turn fine once we get some of the weight off," he explained through the pastry. "You'll be back on in no time."

"Easy for *him* to say—he won't be standing in the rain," muttered the bald man seated next to Efraín. They joined the file of exiting passengers.

Bright umbrellas, like a jungle of exotic fungi, popped open as soon as the passengers stepped into the drizzle. Efraín pulled a much-fold-

Illustration by Tatjana Mai-Wyss

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ed sheet of plastic from his string bag and draped it over his head and shoulders.

"There's room under my umbrella," offered the bald man, tilting it toward Efraín.

Efraín shook his head. "That's all right. Thank you anyway." He was too worried to care about the rain seeping through his shirt.

The passengers, dressed in going-to-town clothes, tiptoed around looking for the least muddy spots to stand. "With so much rain the last few weeks, the ground can't soak up any more," commented the bald man.

Efraín nodded. He didn't know the man's name, or the names of any of the bus passengers. He rarely went to town.

The engine coughed. The driver gunned it back to life. "Can't let it die," he yelled through the open door. "Battery's not good enough to start it again." He swallowed the last of his pastry and hunched over the steering wheel.

The bus crept backwards, then lurched ahead and groaned into the tight curve. It scraped bottom but made it through the turn.

Everyone hurried to reboard as the rain pelted down harder. Efraín returned to his seat near the rear. The air was steamy and thick.

The bus picked up speed. Cattle pastures, vivid green in the late afternoon gloom, bordered the road. Tall grass that had escaped the fences bent over the road edges. The darker green of rain forest topped the more distant hills.

The driver swerved out to pass a massive white sow riding in an ox-cart pulled by two stately black oxen. A barefoot boy using a banana leaf for an umbrella escorted the entourage. Queenlike, the sow did not deign to glance at the lesser creatures packed into the bus.

One couple got off, leaving a pair of empty seats near the front. The bus moved on.

A patch of mango orange in the road ahead caught Efraín's eye. He leaned into the aisle to look through the front windshield. The patch resolved into an orange-shirted old man. He stood stiffly, one hand upraised to halt the bus, the other holding a black umbrella.

A dozen yards farther on stood a scrawny old woman in a loose dress that had once been green. She clutched a faded pink umbrella. Halfway between the man and the woman a path met the road. This red clay path gashed through the pasture and disappeared beyond a small rocky hill. A barbed wire fence looped around the hill like a thorny silver necklace.

The bus creaked to a halt beside the man. He hopped aboard nimbly enough and settled into one of the newly empty seats.

The driver pulled the short distance ahead to the woman. She boarded and dug around in her big net bag till she found the right number of coins for the fare. The driver ground away at the gears, and the bus jolted on.

"Sometimes people stand closer together when they're waiting for the bus so I don't have to make so many stops," the driver commented to the air as the woman staggered down the aisle.

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The woman passed the one empty seat without a glance while the old man stared straight ahead. She continued along the aisle, looking from side to side as though hoping some passenger would vanish.

She gave up her search for a seat when she reached Efraín's row. She set her net bag on the floor, where it immediately fell over and a large papaya threatened to pop out. She bent to shove it in, then grasped the seatback in front of Efraín to brace herself as she stood. Her bony knuckles whitened each time the bus hit a pothole. Several times she nearly landed in Efraín's lap.

After a while Efraín said to the bald man, "All this swaying here at the back is making me dizzy. I think I'll go sit in that empty seat up near the front." He started to rise.

The old woman shoved her furled umbrella against the end of his seat like a gate. It made an incongruous jingle. "No, you don't," she ordered. "I wouldn't take your seat even if you left it empty. *He* would think I'd asked you to. After fifty years I'm not about to give him any satisfaction now."

Efraín sat back down. If this woman insisted on standing, it wasn't his affair. From the corner of his eye he stared at the musical umbrella. Three small round bells were tied to its handle, he observed.

The woman noticed his gaze. "I put those on so I'll hear if anyone tries to steal it," she explained.

Efraín returned to his worries. The message hadn't said anything about the baby. Had he been hurt, too? Or worse?

The woman had no feelings about minding one's own business. "What's *your* trouble?" she demanded, leaning toward Efraín.

"Nothing . . ." Efraín didn't want to talk.

The bus swung out to pass two men on a dilapidated motorcycle. They wore mud-spattered egg-yolk-yellow slickers. The man in the rear held a rust-colored bicycle crossways of the motorcycle.

"Something's wrong," the woman persisted. "You look as if *el tigre* snatched your calf."

Efraín decided it would be easier to tell her; otherwise she'd spend the rest of the trip prying it out of him. "My wife was hurt in an accident," he said. "I'm going to see if she's in the hospital in town." He hoped she was. If she weren't, she was probably dead.

The woman paused. She reached up with one hand to adjust the bobby pins that held her iron-gray hair coiled on her head.

Efraín hoped she now understood that he didn't feel like conversing. But no, that had only whetted her appetite. "That's too bad. Do you live in town?" she asked.

Efraín sighed. "No, we live back there." He waved a hand behind him. "Way beyond where the bus starts."

"What was your wife doing so far from home by herself?"

"Her sister in town caught breakbone fever. Sulema wanted to go right away to help take care of her."

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"I couldn't leave the farm then because I had to finish planting the beans before the rainy season end-

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ed. Otherwise we would have lost the whole crop."

The woman raised her sparse eyebrows.

It sounded silly now, this excuse, though at the time it had been the logical thing to do. "I walked with her to where the road starts," he went on. "Sulema got on the bus with the baby. I walked home and planted beans."

"Hmph. And she got in an accident on the way. What sort of accident?"

"I'm not sure."

The woman's eyebrows went up even more.

"I only got a short message. A neighbor of mine, Mr. Soto, rode his horse by my house late yesterday. He'd been to our local store. The storekeeper asked Soto to tell me that someone who'd just come from town told him that Sulema was crossing a street there and a truck hit her."

"How badly was she hurt?"

"I don't know. Mr. Soto didn't say anything else." Efraín supposed he should feel lucky that his taciturn neighbor had said even that much. "I ran over to my other neighbor's house and asked him to take care of the animals while I'm away. This morning I left at dawn to walk to the bus."

The woman thought over his statement. "I guess it wouldn't have helped if you'd left last night; there's only the one bus," she conceded.

The bus lumbered out of the flat pastureland and began climbing. The driver turned on the headlights. Efraín saw that now the road cut into the side of a hill. He hoped they didn't meet an oncoming car. There would hardly be room for the two vehicles to pass.

It was odd, he thought. They weren't far from town now, only a couple of miles, but they hadn't met a single car or truck.

The quick dusk of the tropics was closing in. Efraín wiped condensation off the window and peered at the steep hillside that rose above the road. A few blades of grass poked up among spindly weeds. Here and there a sapling clung precariously to the slope. Near the top were a couple of larger trees, bark girdled to kill them. A barbed wire fence ran across the hill. Many of its posts leaned drunkenly, their bases eroded out of the soil. Rivulets of muddy water ran down the bare face of the hillside. Efraín shook his head.

The old woman read his thoughts. "That's exactly the sort of thing *he* would do. Clear a hill that's too steep to use for anything so no one else can claim it's their land. Must have taken months to cut the trees off a slope that won't even grow a corncrop. A cow couldn't stand upright to graze there, either."

" 'He'? You mean the man who got on the bus before you?" Efraín asked, confused. "Does he own this hillside?"

"No, but he's just like whoever does own it. He's the kind of person who'd rejoice if a flood carried away his house as long as it took his neighbor's house too. You saw that fence where I got on the bus?"

"The one around the rocky little hill? Yes."

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"*He* built that, fifty years ago. That hilltop belonged to me and my husband Gilberto."

"Ah—what did you use it for?" Efraín asked, puzzled by how anyone could gainfully employ such a rocky spot.

"Well, we didn't really use it for anything, there were too many stones. But it was *our property.*"

"I see."

"Then one day *he* had a squabble with Gilberto. Claimed our pig sneaked into his garden and gobbled up four ripe pineapples. Gilberto told him that we kept a sharp eye on our pig, and he'd do better to catch his little nephews and look at their shirt fronts to learn who ate the pineapples."

Efraín felt adrift. "Er—what does the fence have to do with the missing pineapples?"

"The two men argued more and more until it was time to go home for lunch. Then Gilberto and I were busy hulling rice for a couple of days. The next time we walked to the corner of our farm nearest *his* farm, we saw that he had moved his fence over to include our hill!" The woman's voice shook with outrage.

"Couldn't you complain to the authorities? There must have been a judge in town even—" Efraín stopped himself before saying "even that long ago."

"We did. My husband made a denouncement at the court. But that judge was transferred before he studied the case. The new judge was *his* cousin."

"The old judge's cousin?"

"No, our neighbor's cousin. The new judge kept putting off the case. My husband would walk to town—that was before this road was built—and ask the secretary when the case would be studied. The secretary always gave some excuse."

"Did your husband ever try to see the judge?"

"The secretary always said he was out. Then one day a cow kicked my husband in the head and he died."

"Did you try to continue the case?"

The woman pressed her lips together. "Yes, I did. The judge said it sounded as if I had right on my side but he couldn't do a thing to help me."

"Why not?"

"All the records of my husband's original complaint had disappeared. It was too late by then to file a new complaint. You know you only have a few months to complain about someone's fencing your property and claiming it as theirs."

Efraín nodded. "But I've heard the court gives you a carbon copy of your statement when you make a denouncement. That would prove your husband reported the fence within the time limit."

The woman's hands tightened on the seat back. "We had a copy, but my husband hid it to keep it safe. I took the house apart after he died, looking. I couldn't find it." A quick gleam blazed from her eyes. She glanced ahead at her neighbor.

The bus swayed into a curve. Suddenly it slewed sideways in the road. The old woman fell across Efraín and the bald man. The papaya shot out of her bag and struck

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Efraín's legs. People on the dropoff side of the road screamed as the rear tires skimmed the edge.

The bus slid to a stop. Passengers threw themselves at the closed door.

"Back up!" the driver yelled. "The door won't open with all of you jammed against it!" People retreated enough for him to open the door.

The old woman still lay across Efraín's lap. Her body seemed light as a stick doll. Blue veins laced across her calves and ankles and disappeared into scuffed black shoes. She'd be better off spending her money to have those shoes resoled instead of on busfare to pursue this ancient grudge, Efraín thought, seeing shiny nail-ends protruding from the soles.

He helped the woman to her feet. "What happened?" she asked. "A blowout?" She bent down to stuff the runaway papaya back in her bag.

The bald man pulled open the window. Efraín caught a few words from passengers who'd already gotten off: "—mudslide! All over the road!"

When their turn to exit came, Efraín stepped into a layer of mud that came an inch up his rubber boots. The driver had left the engine running and the headlights on. They illuminated a mass of mud and rocks that smothered the road ahead. The dark hillside loomed stark above them. Gouges cut it where the earth had fallen away.

The bus had stopped just short of the slide.

Efraín reached out to touch a wild hibiscus bush that stood unscathed at the base of the hill in front of the bus, a foot from the mudslide's path. Its crimson flowers were like splotches of blood in the devastation.

A couple of boys, first off the bus, were picking their way through the quagmire covering the road. Their figures faded as they reached the headlights' limit.

Efraín looked back to identify a putt-putting sound approaching the bus. A pale eye drew near, and he recognized the old motorcycle with the yellow-slickered riders. They parked behind the bus and leaned the bicycle against the bus's rear.

"What's going on?" one asked.

The driver had gotten off. He shook his head. "Mudslide. Bus won't make it through."

Efraín rubbed his face. He had to get to town tonight. He couldn't bear another night of not knowing about Sulema.

The boys returned from their explorations. "The road's clear after a hundred yards or so," one announced. "Grab your things, everybody, and let's go before the rain starts again."

"Town's not far," the driver said. "You folks can walk there in half an hour. Once you're past the slide, it shouldn't be hard to keep on the road even in the dark. I'll wait with the bus. Maybe tomorrow they can send people with shovels to clear the road. Or even a machine, if there's one in town."

The engine choked. The headlights flickered. The driver leaped aboard more quickly than Efraín

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thought possible and pumped the accelerator. The engine recovered.

"Good thing we didn't come through a little earlier," the bald man murmured.

Efraín nodded. The torrent of mud would have swept the bus away.

Night had fallen. Passengers milled about. Some reboarded the bus to gather their possessions for the hike. Others debated whether to sleep on the bus and wait for daylight. The old man stood off to one side.

Efraín found himself next to the old woman, who was wringing her hands. "I have to be in town first thing in the morning," she wailed.

The drizzle had begun again. "It might be better to wait till dawn," Efraín suggested. "It'll be easier to walk when you can see, and it might not be raining then." And you'll be less likely to slip and break your leg or catch pneumonia, he thought.

The woman shook her head emphatically. "You don't understand," she said. "The paper I was talking about—the copy that proves my husband reported that fence—*I found it.* After all these years. He'd stuffed it into a crack in the adobe of the bedroom wall. Remember that little earthquake the other day? It opened up the crack. I'm going to the court and—" Her eyes flicked past Efraín, and she broke off.

"If it's been fifty years, another day won't matter," Efraín said, but the woman was boarding the bus.

"I'll get my bag," she said over her shoulder.

"Don't know how much longer I can keep this engine going," the driver yelled from his seat. "Anybody who's crossing tonight had better move fast, before the headlights fail."

"We're going," said a young man, gripping a sturdy toddler with one hand and a suitcase with the other. "His grandmother in town won't sleep if we don't arrive tonight." The pair set out along the golden path cast by the headlights. Several others followed, the old man among them.

The bald man shook his head and turned toward the bus. "Not me," he said. "I'm staying where it's dry."

The yellow-slickered motorcycle men walked toward the door. "So are we," one told the driver. "Looks like there'll be plenty of 'beds' on your bus, if you don't mind."

"Be my guest."

Efraín approached the men before they stepped aboard. "Pardon me. Do you think you could bring your motorcycle up here and leave the headlight on till everyone's across?"

"It wouldn't do any good—it's too dim to give much light," one answered. He looked around suspiciously as though checking for traffic inspectors and lowered his voice. "You see, it's just a modified taillight. That's why I'm going to town, to buy a real headlight."

Efraín had his string bag over his shoulder. He'd wait for the hardheaded old woman. If he couldn't stop her from going, at least he could accompany her. There she was, stepping off the bus with her

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net bag. The papaya, somewhat battered, still protruded from the top. The closed umbrella jangled as it swung from her arm.

Efraín and the old woman entered the slide area. Great gobs of mud slumped against the upslope, but none blocked the road. Most of the slide had poured off the hill like too-soft frosting slipping off a layer cake, leaving only a glossy coating. Efraín's rubber boots sank in to his ankles before hitting the solidity of the former roadbed.

At least the mud was watery, not too sticky, he thought. But something about that made him nervous.

Rocks, jagged spears of broken saplings, and other debris clogged the road. Tangled strands of barbed wire from the fallen fence made a trap for the unwary.

What had been the road's edge was now scalloped as though a giant had taken bites from it. Efraín peeked cautiously over the side. The headlights' diffuse glow didn't reach far enough for him to see what lay downslope.

He bent his head back and strained his eyes trying to pierce the uniform blackness of the hillside above them. He couldn't even distinguish the hill from the sky. Not being able to see his surroundings made his skin prickle. One just didn't go walking around after dark. That was a basic rule of life.

Efraín stumbled. He'd neglected another of the subconscious rules he lived by: always look where you are putting your feet. He extricated his leg from a loop of barbed wire and concentrated on watching for light glinting on further obstacles. The woman trudged beside him. Mud slurped in her shoes.

Efraín tripped over a fencepost and landed on his knees in a pool of inky water hidden by the shadow of a huge boulder. He stood. Muddy water oozed over the tops of his boots. He stepped out of the calf-high pool and balanced on one foot. He pulled off a boot, dumped out sludge, replaced the boot. He repeated the process with the other boot.

The woman had waited. They walked on, now at the outer limits of the headlights. Vague figures of other passengers, traversing the slide at their own pace, straggled around them.

"You're almost through the worst part," a voice called from the darkness ahead. "Everybody's waiting here—we'll all walk together."

The woman stopped. "I'd better check," she said

Efraín halted, too. "Pardon me?"

The woman thrust her bag into his arms. "Hold this." She yanked out the papaya and wedged it between her knees, careful to keep it out of the muck. She stuck her arms in the net bag and rummaged about.

The drizzle turned to rain. The woman paused long enough to open her umbrella and clamp the handle between her elbow and her body.

Efraín coughed. "Ah . . . what are you doing?"

The woman raised her head. "It's not here! It must have slipped out in the bus, when the bag fell over." She jammed the papaya back into the bag.

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"What did you lose?"

"The paper my husband hid," she explained. She snatched her bag from Efraín and strode back toward the bus.

Slow down, Efraín thought. Before he could call out, the woman toppled flat on her face in the slop. She lay still.

Efraín ran to her.

Turtlelike, the woman's head popped up from he mud. "I'm fine," she snapped. "Just went a little too fast. I can't see well at night."

Efraín helped her up and retrieved her umbrella from the mud. He kept a hand on the woman's arm to steady her. "We'll find your paper. Then why don't you sleep on the bus? You and the paper will reach town safely tomorrow."

"But *he's* already on his way! He'll be at the judge's first thing in the morning. I don't know what he might tell the judge."

"Why would he go see the judge? Does he even know that you found the paper?"

"Yes—I'm afraid I—I mentioned it to a few neighbors yesterday after it turned up. You see, he was always gloating to people about how stupid Gilberto was to lose that paper, that if he hadn't we would have gotten our hill back."

"He admitted the hill was really your property?"

"Yes, to everybody but the judge. So I just had to let people know that we hadn't lost the paper after all."

Efraín's patience had worn thin. In his mind he saw Sulema lying alone in a cold bleak room, concrete walls shutting her off from the open land and fresh air. "What difference can it make what he tells the judge?" Efraín burst out. "Who cares now, except for you and your neighbor? I don't even think—" He made himself stop. He doubted the judge would, or even could, do anything about a fence that had been put up fifty years before. But he didn't have the right to smash this woman's hope so harshly.

The woman jerked out of his grip and began walking again. "You don't think the judge will do anything," she said. "That's what everybody tells me. Maybe they're right. But I want people to know that my husband didn't lose that paper. He put it in a safe place. It wasn't his fault the cow kicked him before he could tell me where."

Efraín jogged after her, mud sucking at his boots. The air was so dense he realized he was paddling with his arms as though swimming.

He caught up with the woman. As they neared the bus, he raised his hand to shield his eyes from the glare. The engine chugged more feebly than before. A knot of indecisive people still hung about the door—a tall woman with a baby and a few men arguing about whether to go or stay.

"Change your minds?" the driver called as Efraín and the woman approached the steps. He leaned out the door and brushed pastry crumbs from his hands, then plonked down in his seat again.

"No. I forgot something." The woman reached out to pull herself up the steps. Her hand missed the doorframe.

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"Let me get it," Efraín said. He took the piece of plastic from his string bag and spread it on the bottom step, slippery now with tracked-on mud. "You sit here." He hoped that after she sat a while the woman's muscles would seize up and force her to stay on the bus. Though the rain was warm, his drenched clothes were chilling him. The woman must be cold, too.

She started to protest, then sank down on the plastic. "Well, all right. The paper's folded inside a plastic bag. I knew it would rain today."

The engine sputtered. "Don't wait much longer if you're going," the driver warned the passengers dithering outside the door.

Efraín stomped mud from his boots and stepped around the woman to enter the dark cavern of the bus. Scattered snores rose from people who had stretched out on double seats, feet protruding into the aisle. "Excuse me," he muttered, squeezing past.

He came to his former seat and knelt. He put his head at floor level and looked about, hoping for a faint gleam of light reflecting off the paper's plastic wrapper.

Nothing. He moved up a row. There! Something shiny lay against the wall. It must have been kicked forward in the stampede to get off the bus, Efraín thought. He reached out and closed his fingers around it.

The bus shuddered. The engine wheezed like a dying mule. Efraín jerked his head up and looked forward through the windshield.

The headlights dimmed, brightened, faded, as the engine gasped.

Outside, frantic yells fought with the motor noise: "Run!" "Go!" Efraín saw people surging forward into the mud, tripping, picking themselves up, and running on, trying to dodge through the slide before the headlights failed completely.

The lights flickered one last time and blinked out as the engine died for good. Shouts grew faint as the runners drew farther away.

Then another sound blotted out all others: first a distant rush like a strong wind through treetops, then the all-powerful roar of a river in flood. Sharp snaps rang out like rifle shots. The bus trembled. For a dizzying moment it seemed to rise free of gravity, then gently came to rest.

The great rushing noise ceased.

The passengers, now wide awake, gabbled with confusion.

Efraín grabbed hold of the first person to bump into him. "Do you have a match?" he asked.

"What? No, no," the man said.

Another voice spoke. "I do." A rasp cut through the darkness as a match flared. Frightened faces took form.

A white glow blossomed at the front of the bus. "Somebody better go see what happened," the driver quavered. "I'll let you use my flashlight."

"You mean you had a flashlight all this time?" snapped a teenage girl.

"Just this one—it's not like I could have given everybody a flashlight. I keep it in my lunchbag where nobody will touch it, in case of an emergency," he explained, recovering some bravado.

The angry girl snatched the

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flashlight and left the bus with the bald man. Efraín followed.

The rain had stopped. The light illuminated the tall woman clutching the baby. She cowered against the bus's side as though trying to press herself into its steel. "Everybody else ran," she whispered.

"The old woman who was sitting on the steps, too?" Efraín asked.

"Everyone but me."

The next thing Efraín saw made him jump back. Long white bones stretched under the front of the bus.

With a closer look he realized that this was the skeleton of the wild hibiscus bush, stripped of leaves, bark, and flowers. A branch had caught around the wheel.

The girl shone the flashlight ahead. The landscape had changed. A second wave of mud had swept away wire, fenceposts, saplings. Only the largest boulders remained. The slide had missed the bus by inches. Its edge had torn the hibiscus from the earth, skinned it, and cast it aside where it had come to rest straddling the bus wheel.

"Think they had time to cross before—" the girl asked.

The bald man shrugged.

Efraín didn't know either. He tried to remember the sequence: lights failing, people running, their cries getting fainter, the rushing sound. When had the roar of the slide reached its peak as it swept across the road? He couldn't judge the passage of time.

The others had come out of the bus. The driver cupped his hands around his mouth and faced forward. "Hi-up!" he bellowed.

A muffled echo replied. "Somebody's there," the girl said. "Let's go see how many made it."

One of the yellow-slickered men came forward, brandishing his bicycle. "I'll carry this across and ride to town for help," he explained.

"If there's anybody to help," the bald man said morosely.

Efraín knew that slides rarely left injured survivors. Either they missed you completely, or they killed you.

The girl and the bald man set out with the bicycle man. Efraín trailed after. Something crinkled in his hand. He realized he still held the woman's paper and put it into his string bag.

"I have to stay with the bus," the driver called after them. "It's my responsibility."

The girl swung the light from side to side as she walked: from the steep upslope to their right, to the left edge where the road fell away to nothingness. A splintered tree trunk balanced on the dropoff and Efraín realized that the rifle-shot sounds had been the big girdled trees snapping.

Mud coated everything. The white light turned the landscape a slick glossy gray like animal entrails. The hillside made itself felt as a living presence that might choose to swat them away at any moment. Efraín found himself holding his breath, then sucking in a big gulp of air as quickly as he could for fear of jarring loose another slide.

They reached the fencepost Efraín had fallen over. Ahead was the boulder where he and the old wom-

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an had turned back earlier. The flashlight beam passed all around the rock, beyond it, then back to the shallow pool where Efraín had fallen. The light reflected ghostly green off a small narrow island that rose from the water.

A sigh wisped from the little group.

Efraín waded into the pool. He knelt beside the woman, turned her onto her back, and slipped his arms under her.

He carried her out to the others. Her head fell to the side. Brown water ran from her mouth. Her long hair hung loose now.

Nobody spoke. The girl reached out and smoothed the strands of muddy hair off the old woman's face and closed her eyes.

"Can you carry her all right?" the bald man asked.

Efraín nodded. "She doesn't weigh much."

The girl shone the light ahead. Beyond the boulder the pathway narrowed. A great pile of dirt rested against the former hillside, leaving less than a yard between it and the drop-off.

"If they don't have a road machine in town, it'll take weeks to clear this with shovels," she said. "Let's go."

The bald man led the way. Efraín came next. The girl walked behind him to give him the best light for his burden. The bicycle man stumbled along at the rear.

"Don't let that bicycle bump the slide and knock you off," the bald man called over his shoulder.

The bicycle man answered with a grunt.

The bald man advanced slowly, easing his weight onto each step in case the road edge was undercut. Efraín hoped the path didn't close off completely. Their party would have a hard time turning around.

He tried to think of an alternate route to town in case they were forced to go back. He supposed he could walk back to where the bus had started climbing out of the flatlands and cut across the hills, but that would have to wait for daylight—another day of not knowing about Sulema.

His fears eased as the path widened. The mudpile shrank against the hill. The gravel road surface reappeared. They were beyond the slide.

The flashlight lit up a cluster of people in the road. They gathered around Efraín and the dead woman.

"Is anyone missing?" the bald man asked.

The girl shone the light around at everybody. People looked at each other and shrugged. Recognizing each other as fellow passengers was easy. Remembering who wasn't there was very hard.

Efraín did notice, however, that the old man was absent.

He identified several of the people as part of the group that had been near the door when he entered the bus to look for the paper. Their clothes were torn and mud-soaked. They had cuts on their faces and hands from running through the wire and obstacles.

"How many people were by the door when the lights started failing?" Efraín asked them.

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"We've been talking about that," one answered. "We think it was the four of us, the poor deceased lady, and a woman with a baby."

Efraín answered the question in the other's voice. "The woman with the baby stayed by the bus. She's all right."

"Good . . . that's something, at least." The man waved a hand at the men standing with him. "I was the last of us to get across, and the edge of the slide passed so close behind me it I thought it had me. None of us noticed the old woman running with us."

The girl turned the flashlight off. "Better save the batteries," she said.

"Did anyone walk on toward town?" Efraín asked.

"No," several people replied.

"We'll count everyone here," said the bicycle man. "Then somebody can go back and count how many people are with the bus. We know every seat except one was taken, and no one was standing except this poor lady."

The bicycle man looked in the direction of the bus. "I'd better get to town and wake up the police."

"Why don't I ride your bicycle to town while you go back to the bus and count people?" Efraín suggested. "I'll leave the bicycle at the police station."

"Fine," the man answered. "I wasn't looking forward to the ride."

"Take the light," the girl told Efraín. "You'll need it. We'll get back to the bus all right, going slowly."

Efraín lashed the flashlight to the bicycle basket with a piece of string from his pocket. "I'll leave it at the police station with the bike," he said. "You'll tell the driver where it is?"

"Yes."

The seat was too high for him, so the others steadied the bike while he mounted. He reached forward and turned on the flashlight. He could just reach the pedals on tiptoe. Efraín adjusted his string bag so it hung across his back. The bald man gave him a push, and he began peddling.

Efraín tried to steer around the biggest puddles. Wet banana leaves slapped him in the face when he veered too close to the edge of the road.

The flashlight beam had weakened by the time the road started its descent. Efraín was relieved to round a curve and see the lights of town sparkling in the valley.

Soon he was pedaling past small, fragrant gardens and close-set little houses, dark and still at this hour. An occasional dog more energetic than its fellows darted out to yip at him. The ride smoothed as he reached pavement. Streetlights appeared. Ahead was the cement-block police station, a bare lightbulb shining over its door.

Efraín stopped pedaling and coasted till he was almost to the building. When the bike was ready to topple, he flung his leg over and hit the ground running. He leaned the bike against the block wall and called out.

"Sir? Is anyone here?"

A young policeman appeared in the doorway, rubbing his eyes with one hand and tucking in his shirt with the other.

"Sorry to wake you," Efraín said.

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"There was a mudslide on the road east of town. A woman is dead."

"You're sure she's dead?"

"Yes."

The policeman put his head back into the station. "Juan! You awake?"

"Yeah," a voice replied. "I heard. You want to ride the motorcycle to the scene? I'll go wake up the judge. He'll have to see where it happened."

"Okay," the young policeman agreed. "What time is it?"

"Just after midnight," his partner's voice answered.

The young policeman found a pencil stub and a scrap of paper in his pocket. "I'll need your name," he said to Efraín.

Efraín told him. He explained what he knew about the old woman. He also mentioned a few things he had observed and thought over during the bike ride. He had met this policeman before, briefly, and knew he was competent.

"I have to go now," Efraín said. "This bicycle belongs to a man in a yellow slicker. The flashlight belongs to the bus driver. I expect they'll pick them up in the morning."

"We'll take care of them." The policeman wheeled the bike inside the station.

Efraín walked the few blocks to the hospital, a two story wood-frame structure on the next corner. Years of tropical sun and rain had softened its turquoise walls. Efraín knew they wouldn't let him in at this hour, but he could at least find out if Sulema were there. His chest felt the way it had one time when an *ajo* log had rolled onto him.

He stepped inside. A round man was tipped back in a chair at a desk. His feet rested on a clipboard. His eyes were closed. Whuffling sounds came from his mouth.

Efraín leaned over the desk to try to see the clipboard: many lines, scrawls in different colored ink. Seeing them didn't help, of course, since Efraín couldn't read.

He coughed. He cleared his throat.

The man continued sleeping. Finally Efraín gave the clipboard a sharp tap with his fingers.

The man jerked awake.

"Excuse me," Efraín said. "I believe my wife is a patient here. Sulema Sandoval. Would you check?"

"It's not visiting hours. You can't see anyone now."

"I know. I only need to know if she's here." Efraín stood planted solid as a tree.

The man sighed. He picked up the clipboard and ran his finger down the list of names. "Not here."

"She would have been admitted day before yesterday."

The man thrust the clipboard at Efraín. "You look."

Efraín took a step back. "Ah, maybe you could."

The man glanced up, taking in Efraín's farm boots and carefully mended shirt. "Oh, I understand." He turned back a page and worked his way down the list. "Did you say Sánchez?"

"No, Sandoval."

"Here it is. 'Admitted to emergency room.' Then, 'moved to intensive care.' But the name is crossed out."

Efraín tightened his fingers on

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his string bag till they were numb. "What does that mean?"

The man squinted at a scribble running up the margin. "I think it says . . . hmm . . . 'transferred to women's ward.' " He looked up at Efraín. "You're dripping wet and covered in mud."

"There was a mudslide."

"I see. Well, if they moved your wife out of intensive care, it means she's better."

"Does it say anything there about a baby?"

The man peered again at the scribble. "'Minor to uncle.'"

The baby was with Sulema's sister's family. Efraín felt the log begin to lift from his chest. "Could I look in from the door? Only for a minute."

The man shook his head. "It's against regulations. Come back at ten." He stared at Efraín. "Looks like you traveled a long way. From the country?"

Efraín nodded. "I came as soon as I heard."

"My parents came from the country. Mom's always telling me how hard life was there, but I think she misses it sometimes." He cleared his throat. "The women's ward is the far right wing of the hospital, on the ground floor. You'll have to leave now."

Efraín smiled. "Thank you."

Outside, he walked along the hibiscus bushes that fringed the hospital. He thought of the last hibiscus he'd seen, the wild bush stripped by the slide. At the far right end of the building he squeezed through the shrubbery and looked through the louvered glass windows, open to let air circulate.

Rows of narrow beds lined the room. Lumpy shapes lay under coarse white sheets. In the bed nearest the window lay a young woman whose long black hair spread across the pillow.

Efraín reached through the window and laid his hand softly on her pillow.

Her eyes opened. She blinked. "You're not a dream."

"No."

"I knew you'd be here tonight. You must have gotten a message yesterday, and left on this morning's bus."

Efraín nodded.

"I think they'll let me out in the morning," Sulema went on. "I wasn't really hurt. They said I had to stay here for a day or two because I was unconscious for a few minutes."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"No. The nurse told me that sometimes people remember later." She shrugged and went on. "Epifanio is fine. He's with my sister's family." When they named Epifanio for Efraín's grandfather, they had joked about the baby having a name that was longer than he was.

"How is your sister?"

"Telma's much better. Her family came to see me today—yesterday." Sulema studied him over. "The bus usually gets to town by dark."

"There was a mudslide. The bus couldn't pass. I came the rest of the way on a bicycle that I borrowed."

"Something else happened."

"Maybe . . . I'm wondering if a

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woman was killed tonight because of some pineapples that disappeared fifty years ago."

"Tell me."

Efraín reached into his string bag and took out the woman's paper in its plastic wrapper. He carefully removed the fragile paper and handed it to Sulema.

"What does this say?" he asked.

Sulema turned the paper toward the hall light and read the fifty-year-old denouncement to him. They discussed the evening's events for some time, then fell silent. After a while Efraín realized Sulema was asleep.

When the sky began to pale, he loosened her fingers from his hand and withdrew his arm from the window. He rubbed the circulation back into it and set off for his sister-in-law Telma's house. His fellow passengers would have a pleasant walk to town this morning, Efraín thought, savoring the sun on his face.

A short walk down a muddy side street brought him to a sprawling angel's trumpet bush arching over a white gate. Efraín turned into the yard and found his brother-in-law polishing a shiny metal handcart.

"Morning, Abelino," Efraín greeted him. "Off to work?"

"Yes, it's all Telma's fault. If she weren't such a good cook, I could have a job sitting at a desk all day. I wouldn't need to work off her *pan dulce* and *empanadas.*" Telma's sweetrolls and turnovers were famous.

Efraín heard his sister-in-law laugh from inside the house. Abelino operated his own business on the town's main shopping street, wheeling goods from stores to customers' homes: a giant watermelon on a hot day, a sack of cement to fix a wall, a haunch of pork to barbecue for a party, a propane cylinder for a stove.

Efraín left his boots on the doorstep and entered the house. Telma sat propped up on a fuschia-flowered couch, Epifanio on her lap. Telma's younger daughter was adjusting crocheted booties on his feet. The left bootie consisted of irregularly shaped loops and dangling threads. The right was perfect.

"Look, *tio,* I made this one myself," the girl explained, pointing to the left bootie. "Mama made the other one." Efraín sat Epifanio on his lap and admired both booties.

Telma's older girl insisted on making *pinto* for her uncle's breakfast. While she sauteed peppers, onion, cilantro, and garlic, her sister made tortillas. The fragrances from the stove reminded Efraín that he'd missed both lunch and dinner the day before. The girls stirred black beans and rice into the skillet and served him.

Much restored by breakfast, Efraín headed for the hospital. He spotted the bald man from the bus at the outdoor cafe on the corner. He sat on a wooden stool pulled up to the counter next to the sidewalk.

"Did you walk in now or last night?" Efraín asked.

"Neither," the bald man answered smugly. "I got a ride with the policeman on his motorcycle."

"Was anyone else killed besides the unfortunate lady?"

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"One old man disappeared. They haven't found his body. It could have been washed miles away."

"So the policeman just took a quick look and left." Efraín had hoped for more from the young official.

"Oh, he's going right back. He needed to arrange for a truck to drive out to the edge of the slide and bring the passengers and the woman's body back to town."

"Do you think he's left yet?"

"I know he hasn't because he's waiting for the tortilla lady to pass the police station. The bus driver made the policeman promise to bring him some cheese tortillas. There she is now."

Efraín glanced down the street and observed a woman approaching. She resembled the short wide basket she carried on her head.

"I think I'll go speak to the policeman before he leaves," Efraín said.

"I think I'll have another glass of *café con leche,*" the bald man said, gulping the last of his thick creamy coffee. "I thought last night would never end."

Efraín proceeded to the station and found the young policeman sitting at the table that served as his desk. He was staring at a pair of old, black, women's shoes on the table in front of him.

The policeman looked up. "I took these off the lady and brought them back here to make me think harder," the policeman said. "You're right, they prove the slide never touched her. The force of it would have ripped them off her in an instant. That fencepost you said you tripped over proves it, too. The slide missed that spot. It split around the big boulder and missed the pool and the fencepost."

Efraín nodded.

The policeman continued. "The woman could have tripped as she ran in the darkness, hit her head on the boulder, landed in the pool unconscious, and drowned. Or there's your theory."

"My what?"

"Your suggestion. The old man waited in the shadow of the boulder and drowned her. He couldn't bear to have the judge see that paper and rule in her favor."

"Yes."

"If that's the case, the idea of drowning her in the little pool probably occurred to him on the spur of the moment, when he saw the pool. I expect he was in the boulder's shadow when you and the woman reached the boulder the first time. He couldn't do anything with you there. Besides, he heard her say she'd left the paper on the bus. He waited, hoping she'd come back alone. You take it from there," the policeman said.

Efraín picked up the story. "When the headlights failed and the people ran by, the woman would have been last. The old man knew her in the dark by her jingling umbrella. He pushed her down, shoved her head under water, and held her till she stopped struggling. Then he started one way or the other, either toward the bus or toward the people who'd run by. At that moment the hillside fell again and took him with it. He had taken the woman's bag, thinking it now held the paper."

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"You're sure he couldn't have escaped?"

"He didn't reach the people on the other side. He didn't make it back to the bus. He wasn't at the boulder when we found the woman's body. The girl shone the flashlight all around. We would have seen him if he'd been hiding."

"Why do you suppose she ran when the lights began to fail? She didn't have the paper."

Efraín shrugged. "People don't think when they let panic take over."

The policeman sighed. "It's a great pity she can't tell us which theory is correct." He picked up a shoe and turned it over.

Efraín leaned closer. He smiled. "But she has." He pointed to a mango-orange thread caught on a nailhead sticking out from the sole.

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone on the bus can tell you that the old man was wearing a shirt that color. His shirttail would have come out in the struggle. She kicked as he held her under water and the nail caught in the fabric."

The tortilla woman was passing the station's open door. The policeman called to her and bought a stack of thick cheese tortillas for the bus driver. The woman wrapped them in soft oval almond tree leaves.

A stake-bed truck wheezed to a halt at the door. "I've got to go," the policeman told Efraín. "I'll go by the court later and make a declaration that the mudslide could not have killed the woman. It would have stripped her as bare as the hibiscus bush. You'll take the old denouncement to the judge?"

"Yes. I'll bring along the bald man as another witness that the shoe had no orange thread on it when the woman fell across us."

Efraín stepped outside as a motorcycle drew up. Yellow slickers were tied to the rear. The two men from the night before got off.

"Came for my bicycle," one explained. "We cleared a narrow passageway—a truck drove up behind the bus early this morning and happened to have some shovels on board. But they'll have to move that boulder and a lot more mud before the bus can get through."

Efraín walked towards the hospital. It was nearly visiting hours. He was sure Sulema would convince the doctor to release her this morning. She would go with him to the court and make certain the judge wrote a decision in the old woman's favor. It wouldn't do the woman any good now, but it was right.

He heard a zinging that could only be big wooden oxcart wheels. Efraín glanced toward the street.

The large white sow, eyes half closed as she dozed, swayed gently in the cart. The shiny black oxen proceeded along the street, the boy whistling beside them.

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Alan Gordon



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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The company Phil started out of college consisted of Phil for two years. Then one of his software designs escaped its obscure niche and went global. By the time he was twenty-seven he had enough money to retire, which allowed him to spend his waking hours—they ranged from two to twenty-three a day—playing games. When the games grew old, he moved on to new ones. Sometimes he designed his own, and some of them took off and made him some more money he didn't need to fill all the free time he had.

He had a mansion built on the edge of a desert, with a wall around it studded with broken glass. Beside the mansion was an Olympic pool that lost half its contents to evaporation each day and a miniature golf course he got bored with after a week. He had no full-time staff. A team of Mexican women came in on Mondays to vacuum, dust, and refill the freezers. When he wanted variety, he ordered Chinese food and tipped the delivery boy twenty bucks for a ten dollar meal. He handled all of his banking and investments online. He had a pool table, a satellite dish with every possible channel, a flat-screen digital television barely smaller than the wall on which it hung, a gallery that he never went into filled with French Impressionist masterpieces bought as an investment, and a vast library of videos, DVD's, and games. There were no books in the house.

Emerging from his afternoon nap one morning, he found in his e-mail an intriguing solicitation that had seeped through his spam filters.

"Hi, Phil," it said. "We're looking for a few good gamers to test the beta version of Heist. We meet at nine Eastern, www.heistgame.com. If you're interested, download the software and join us."

Heist, he thought. Not a war game. Not necessarily a shoot-'em-up. Strategy? He called up a program that poked cautiously at the link, checking for Trojan Horses lurking behind the placid blue letters. When he got the all-clear message, he clicked on the link.

The screen went black. Then a peephole opened, and he heard a digitized Chico Marx say, "You can'ta come in unless you say 'Swordfish.'"

Phil smiled. "Swordfish" had been the cheat code for the legendary text game Adventure from his childhood. He picked up a microphone. "Swordfish," he said.

Seconds later a door opened. "Hi," said a voice. "Welcome to Heist. Newbies can download the software by pressing RETURN. By downloading, you enter into a sacred and legally binding oath of secrecy until we've finished debugging. Enjoy." He pressed RETURN.

The download took an impressive thirty-four minutes. Phil scanned the file for viruses but found none. At five minutes to nine Eastern, he double-clicked the icon. Edward G. Robinson filled the screen, sneering and gesturing with a stogie. "So you wanna join the gang? Then you gotta prove yourself, see? Until then you're just a mug like the rest of the mugs.

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Hit RETURN and we'll show you the target."

Wonder if they got a license from the Robinson estate, Phil thought as he hit RETURN. Or whatever Robinson's real name was, he couldn't remember. Maybe he was in the public domain by now. The screen divided into three sectors: a large picture of a friendly brick building with SMALLTOWN NEIGHBORHOOD SAVINGS AND LOAN chiseled over its entryway, a scrolling chat room, and an equipment section that was empty except for a small graphic of a .38 revolver.

A dialogue box popped up. "Select gender." Phil picked female. "You are Ms. Scarlet." A small circular picture of a tough-looking woman dressed in that color appeared at the top of his screen. "You may either enter the planning room or scout the bank." He clicked on the .38, then the doorway to the bank. The point-of-view zoomed through the revolving door, and a woman screamed, "She's got a gun!" Before he could scan the room, two guards began shooting. The screen went bloody, then black.

Don't think I'll try that approach again, he thought. He clicked the dialogue box for the planning room.

RAINBOW: Hi, Ms. Scarlet. What did we learn?

MS. SCARLET: Don't walk into a bank with a gun drawn.

MR. GREEN: Maybe if you had a bigger gun.

MR. BLUE: Hello. Love the interface.

MS. WHITE: Is this strictly an RPG?

RAINBOW: The beta version is centralized. Ideally, teams gather, work together. We're just starting the interface up. Glad you like it, Blue.

MR. ORANGE: Hello, I'm here.

RAINBOW: Welcome to Heist, Orange.

MR. BLUE: So everyone's anonymous? Cool. Very Tarantino.

MS. WHITE: Yeah, *Reservoir Dogs* rocked.

Ah, the short lives of geeks, thought Phil. He started typing.

MS. SCARLET: Predates Tarantino. He ripped off *The Taking of Pelham 123* with the color names.

MR. PURPLE: Hello, everyone.

RAINBOW: Hi, Purple. Very astute on the movie reference, Scarlet. I think that's everyone. Tell them what you've learned so far, Scarlet.

MS. SCARLET: Don't go in with your gun drawn. You get shot.

MS. WHITE: How many guards?

He thought for a second.

MS. SCARLET: I saw two.

MR. GREEN: What were they packing?

MS. SCARLET: Looked like nines.

MR. GREEN: Piece of cake. I'm going in.

In the viewing screen a man in a green suit entered the bank with a gun in his hand. Seconds later his body was blown back out, riddled with bullets.

MR. GREEN: Okay, so there's three guards.

MS. WHITE: Nice reconnoiter, Green (lol).

RAINBOW: There's a no-chatslang rule. And emoticons lead to immediate dismemberment.

MR. BLUE: Hear, hear. So that makes three guards, six of us. Rainbow, you joining the party?

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RAINBOW: Just here to help and observe.

MR. ORANGE: How about we enter separately, then draw our guns?

MS. SCARLET: I like it. Do we have to shoot, or can we cover and disarm?

RAINBOW: See for yourselves.

MS. SCARLET: Let's go Quaker.

MS. WHITE: I vote blow the men down.

MR. PURPLE: Me too.

MR. GREEN: Absolutely. I'll take the one by the door.

MR. ORANGE: I'll take second.

MS. WHITE: I got three.

MS. SCARLET: Then I guess the rest of us get the money. Are the tellers behind glass?

MR. BLUE: I'll take a look. Unarmed.

A man in blue entered, then emerged seconds later.

MR. BLUE: Old fashioned bank with tellers behind counters.

MR. GREEN: Piece of cake. Okay, you go in, get in position. I'll follow. When I draw, everyone draws.

MS. SCARLET: Excuse me, who made you the boss?

MR. GREEN: Someone's gotta be. This is a gang, not a socialist collective.

MS. WHITE: Cool. Nuff talk, more action. Let's do it.

He followed them in. Green drew his gun. Scarlet drew hers. A teller screamed and started handing over money. Gunshots rang out behind him, or so the sound effects indicated. He turned. Three guards lay on the floor, along with Green. The five dashed outside. And stood.

"Can you hear me?" he said. The voice came through female in the game. Synthesized voice, instantaneously remade. Nice.

"What do we do now?" asked White.

Sirens approached.

"Run or shoot it out?" asked Purple.

"Run!" shouted Blue. They scattered. He turned down a dead-end alley and was cornered by the police. They didn't negotiate.

SCARLET: Anyone survive?

RAINBOW: Nope.

SCARLET: We need some wheels.

WHITE: Maybe we can rent a car.

BLUE: Traceable. Duh.

GREEN: Let's steal one!

They ran through various scenarios, stealing one car, getting into chases with the police, stealing two cars, and so on. Finally, White waited outside in one while Scarlet, Blue, Green, and Purple hit the bank with a minimum of bloodshed. They leapt into the getaway car and peeled off around a corner into an alley where a newly stolen truck awaited, its plates switched with another. They clambered into the back, and Orange drove them out of town. Eddie G. appeared and applauded.

RAINBOW: Well done. You've mastered Level One.

ORANGE: And it only took us four hours!

GREEN: Shoot. I gotta go. I have an exam tomorrow.

WHITE: Stunned silence, Green. How old are you?

RAINBOW: No personal questions, people. Keep it anonymous. You want to try Level Two tomorrow?

PURPLE: I'm there.

BLUE: Me too.

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The rest joined in, then signed off.

Way cool game, thought Phil, genuinely excited to be in on the beta testing for once.

He spent part of the next day reviewing the controls, guessing at combination moves that would give him an edge over the game. He was a little uneasy with some of his anonymous partners. Green and White were a little too gun-happy for his comfort. If the next level were in any way a reflection of the first, it would take more strategy than firepower to get through it.

He swam to get the kinks out, then carbo-loaded for a long night at the keyboard. When the appointed hour arrived, he was seated, a tray of snacks at the ready.

There was a new bank, the Midville State Bank, pictured in the main window. There was also a new window marked GENERAL STORE. He clicked it, and it rushed towards him, revealing a countertop with a hulking goon behind it. He resembled a shaved gorilla but wore a somewhat incongruous shopkeeper's apron.

"What can I do ya for?" said the goon.

"What do you have?" Phil asked. Ms. Scarlet's voice.

"Check it out," said the goon, waving his hand over a display case.

Phil clicked on it. A display of guns filled the screen—automatics, shotguns, and an old Thompson machine gun, lovingly detailed.

"And what am I supposed to use for money?" he asked.

"Youse guys did the Smalltown job, am I right?" the goon pointed out. "Use the take from that."

"I'll be back," promised Phil and went into the chatroom.

RAINBOW: Glad you made it, people. How'd you like the general store?

GREEN: Guns! Bigger and better.

WHITE: Yeah!

SCARLET: They got guns, we got guns, all God's chillun got guns.

ORANGE: You really are a movie geek. What's that one from?

RAINBOW: Anyone? Or shall I take it?

BLUE: After you, enlightened one.

RAINBOW: Marx Brothers. The war song from *Duck Soup*.

SCARLET: Correct. And what do we have for our contestant?

PURPLE: How much do we have to spend?

RAINBOW: Your take from the last job finances the next one. You made five G's.

GREEN: Let's go. I have dibs on the Thompson.

They entered the general store and filled their jackets with weaponry. Then they went charging into the Midville Bank for an immediate fiasco.

BLUE: Okay, so it would have been a good idea to buy ammunition.

ORANGE: A collective duh to that.

SCARLET: And we forgot to reconnoiter first. The guards have better guns this time.

WHITE: You're way too careful, Scarlet.

PURPLE: Yeah, let's have some fun first.

ORANGE: No, Scarlet's right. We want to win this level, don't we?

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GREEN: I got a Thompson full of ammo. Let's use it.

BLUE: How about we go in once banging, let Green get his raging hormones taken care of, then we can work out how we'll do it for real.

SCARLET: Okay. Green, you go first.

It became one of those spontaneous jokes. Green went charging into the bank, Thompson primed, and the other five waited outside and listened to a considerable amount of gunfire. When it subsided, they went into the bank and surveyed the digitized carnage.

"Looks like no one survived," observed White.

"Green is a one-man Wild Bunch with a tommy gun in his hand," said Scarlet.

"Well, since we're in the bank anyway . . ." said Purple. They found a locked door leading to the money. After a brief search of the bodies, they found the keys and plundered away happily until Orange looked up.

"Um, guys?" he said. "We're on *Candid Camera.*" Scarlet drew her gun and started shooting out the security system, but it was too late. The sirens were heard and the usual painful denouement ensued.

WHITE: Okay, that was fun for a while.

GREEN: Very funny letting me go in by myself. But I was totally awesome in there.

ORANGE: Totally. Of course, we all get the chair thanks to you.

PURPLE: Depends on the state. Most of them do lethal injection, now.

BLUE: Could we not get too serious about real-life consequences here?

PURPLE: Just thought I'd inject a note of reality.

WHITE: <<Groan.>>

GREEN: NO CHATSLANG!

SCARLET: And no shouting. Okay, gang, we've got security cameras. What do we do?

ORANGE: Does the General Store sell masks? And spray paint?

RAINBOW: Yes, it does.

After another marathon session of trial and error, the Rainbow Gang finally pulled off the Midville job with all members surviving and making a successful getaway. Green took a bullet to the shoulder, but everyone agreed that was a reasonable cost of doing business. Especially since it was to Green.

The team jelled as a crack robbery gang over the next three jobs, moving through successively larger banks in larger cities. As the security systems became more complex, they fell back on their real skills, hacking their way through sophisticated electronic systems with ease, competing with each other for the fastest solutions. Then it was on to jewelry stores, securities brokers, and museums, with scenarios reminiscent of *Topkapi, The Hot Rock,* even the Pink Panther movies. Phil, with his knowledge of film arcana, became the elder statesman of the group but each of them brought something useful to the table, and despite Green's increasingly psychopathic tendencies as the weaponry took on Duke Nukem dimensions, even he proved useful on more than one occasion.

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Especially when the escape drew vehicular pursuit—he would sit strapped to the hood of the getaway car blowing away police cars while White drove at a pace that made *Ronin* look like a church picnic.

But as with all games, familiarity meant that ennui crept in. The planning became rote, and the chat sessions lacked their usual zing. Phil was beginning to think of bowing out when he received an e-mail that changed everything.

It came from one of his fellow gang members although he didn't know which one. It had been sent through one of those e-mail rerouting services that guarantee anonymity and untraceability.

"Dear Scarlet," it began, which surprised him, knowing as he did that none of them was supposed to know any other's identity. "I found something that scares the hell out of me. Follow the links below."

There were two Internet links. He clicked the first one. It brought up a newspaper archive for the McMinnville *Gazette-Herald*. DARING DAYLIGHT ROBBERY! trumpeted the headline. Below it was a picture of the McMinnville Savings and Loan.

It was a dead ringer for the Smalltown Neighborhood Savings and Loan.

He read the article quickly. Four robbers carrying .38's robbed the bank, jumped into a waiting car driven by a fifth, and peeled away. The car was found in a nearby alley. A witness later remembered seeing a truck leave the other end of the alley and head out of town.

It was the same scenario the Rainbow Gang had come up with in the game.

He printed a hard copy, then followed the second link. This one led to an article in a St. Cloud paper detailing the robbery of a midsized bank by a masked gang who included a man brandishing a tommygun and a woman who had taken out the security cameras with a precisely wielded can of spray paint. The black and white photo showed the Midville bank.

What the hell is going on? he wondered. He checked the dates—both robberies had taken place two weeks after the Rainbow Gang had come up with their successful scenarios.

So art isn't imitating life, he thought, amused that he was thinking along Rod Serling lines. Someone is using us to plan actual robberies.

And his next thought, rising unbidden to the center of his brain, was:

COOL!

He got into the chat room early. Rainbow was waiting for him.

RAINBOW: Greetings, Scarlet.

SCARLET: Hello, Rainbow. Hey, what's your real name? You know all of ours.

RAINBOW: Sorry, it's a state secret. We're moonlighting from our regular jobs to set this company up. Don't want our employers to assert proprietary rights in intellectual property, or whatever that clause was.

SCARLET: Yeah. Kinda like stealing, ain't it?

There was a long pause before the next response was typed in.

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RAINBOW: You seem to be intent on making some kind of point here.

ORANGE: Hello. Anyone else get that weird e-mail?

RAINBOW: What weird e-mail?

SCARLET: Yeah, I got it.

GREEN: Me too. What's up with that?

WHITE: Hello, anyone get that e-mail about the robberies?

PURPLE: I'm here. I think we need to talk.

BLUE: Hey, everyone. Which one of you sent the e-mail?

RAINBOW: What are you all talking about?

GREEN: This is messed up. Someone robbed two banks, and it was just like the game.

SCARLET: Which one of you sent it?

WHITE: Wasn't me.

BLUE: Me neither.

ORANGE: Anyone 'fessing up?

No one did.

RAINBOW: One of you hacked into the game. Who did it?

SCARLET: Any of us could do it. We're all supergeeks in this gang.

WHITE: The real problem is, who the hell are you, Rainbow?

PURPLE: Yeah. You've been using us.

RAINBOW: It's a beta test for a game.

BLUE: Screw that. There was a bank in some hick town called McMinnville that was robbed. And another in St. Cloud. Had our scenarios down to every detail.

ORANGE: Except they got more money. What was it, half a mil each?

WHITE: You got something to say, Rainbow?

RAINBOW: Not without a lawyer.

BLUE: So maybe we should turn you in.

WHITE: Yeah.

RAINBOW: And say what? I press a few keys, and the website is gone. You can't find me.

GREEN: I can. I can trace anything on the Web.

RAINBOW: And if they do catch me, every single one of you is implicated. Did you consider that?

ORANGE: But it was just a game. They can't arrest us for that.

RAINBOW: Do you think they'll believe you? That you were planning several different heists just for fun?

SCARLET: But we didn't make anything. Criminals are in it for the money last time I checked.

WHITE: Yeah, where's our percentage, Rainbow? You guys cleared a cool million on two heists, and without us, you wouldn't have a dime.

GREEN: Hello? Not following this thread.

WHITE: Well, if he's going to threaten us with exposure for something we really didn't do . . .

PURPLE: What are you talking about?

RAINBOW: She's talking about my paying you guys off to keep you quiet.

BLUE: Interesting. How much are we talking about?

RAINBOW: I don't know. How much do you think you deserve? The real gang is putting their necks on the line pulling these jobs. You guys are just a bunch of pasty-faced brainiacs sitting safely at your keyboards. Maybe I can throw a little money your way, but don't come off like you're all bigshots.

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WHITE: What are you saying? We're not just geeks. We could do this.

SCARLET: Whoa, girl.

PURPLE: Well, actually, the later levels are more geekish in nature. There's more hacking involved because of the security systems.

BLUE: Right.

SCARLET: Wait a sec, could we get back to the main point here?

GREEN: Which is what, exactly?

SCARLET: We're talking about actual robberies. Real crime, real consequences.

ORANGE: But you gotta admit, it would be cool.

RAINBOW: What are you talking about?

WHITE: Us doing the thing for real.

RAINBOW: No way. These jobs call for real skills. Real driving, real guns.

GREEN: I can handle a gun. You should see me in the arcades, man.

BLUE: Well, if it came to that, so can I.

WHITE: And I'm a maniac driver for real. That stuff I do in the game I can do in life.

RAINBOW: Yeah, so I'm supposed to trust all of you?

ORANGE: You were blackmailing us into staying quiet.

SCARLET: I thought we were talking about getting paid off.

RAINBOW: Frankly, Scarlet, I don't give a damn. I'm going to pull up stakes and vanish into the ether.

WHITE: Don't forget, we know every scenario of every heist after this. You leave us out, we'll track down the real targets and warn them. I'm guessing you have too much invested in all this to make much profit after only two heists.

Helluva point, thought Phil. He was getting strangely excited.

RAINBOW: So you're blackmailing me?

GREEN: We just want to play the game. For real.

RAINBOW: And where's the good faith?

WHITE: The good faith is that you know who we all are.

SCARLET: So does one of us.

BLUE: But we're a gang. We stick together, the scenario works. And we're talking about some major money now, aren't we?

RAINBOW: The larger banks will be major scores. But it's not about the money with you geeks, is it?

WHITE: Don't discount money, Rainbow. Startup costs in Silicon Valley are murder nowadays.

PURPLE: And some of us went bust. I could use an influx of cash.

WHITE: Is everyone in on this? It will need all of us.

Phil took a deep breath. Held it. Exhaled. Typed.

SCARLET: One proviso. No shooting. We use a safe scenario.

WHITE: For sure.

SCARLET: Then I'm in.

ORANGE: Me too.

PURPLE: Yup.

GREEN: Yeah!

There was a pause.

BLUE: This is nuts. Count me in.

RAINBOW: Point of information. You don't know what each other looks like.

SCARLET: Better that way. We do that heist where we arrive independently. It's a timing job.

WHITE: Right. And we can each

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wear a scarf or tie with our color on it. But one more thing, Rainbow.

RAINBOW: What's that?

WHITE: Like I said, startup costs are murder. You're gonna have to front us some money.

RAINBOW: You're crazy.

GREEN: She's right. Travel costs.

PURPLE: Hot cars and cold guns.

BLUE: I need to buy a tie.

RAINBOW: All right. Five grand each. But we do it over the computer. I stay anonymous. You each send me the account info. You'll have the money by tomorrow, end of business day.

ORANGE: Sounds good. So, Level Seven suit everyone?

GREEN: Aw, that one was too easy.

BLUE: Hey, we're veteran players but newbie robbers. Let's take it slow.

PURPLE: Rainbow, how accurate is the simulation? Do we need to recon again?

RAINBOW: It was accurate as of yesterday.

ORANGE: We should probably go over it one more time, just to make sure nothing's changed.

WHITE: Sooner the better. Where is the bank, Rainbow?

RAINBOW: Dayton, Ohio. I'll send you each the location.

WHITE: So, I'm the wheelman.

ORANGE: I hack the security system, then meet the rest of you on the second floor.

SCARLET: And we're doing cash only. Nothing traceable.

BLUE: Right. How do we synchronize the timing?

GREEN: When we get to Dayton, we call up for the local time and fix our watches by it.

WHITE: Okay. Rainbow, my account info will be in the e-mail when I log off. The rest of you: I'll be in front of the bank in an SUV at eight minutes after eleven. I'll be there for two minutes. I'm a blonde woman, and I'll be wearing white.

ORANGE: Be there or be dead, everyone.

RAINBOW: Good luck, my children.

Phil logged off, then sent his account information to the website.

What am I doing? he thought, but he stood up and felt himself pulled automatically down to a locked cabinet in his living room. He spun the combination lock and opened it.

A rich man, even a rich man without ostentation, likes to protect what he owns. Phil had guns. He probably should have had licenses to go with them, but since he never took them out of his house, he hadn't bothered. An anti-regulatory streak ran through him, a mistrust of institutions and an anarchic nature that combined in the occasional casual abuse of the law. Now he was getting more serious.

He picked the Colt .45, a WWII-era weapon that he'd bought at a small gun show. It had probably been stolen. He wiped it clean, oiled it, made sure the slide and the clip were working smoothly.

He had to get to Dayton without getting stopped for carrying a gun. Airports were clearly out, and he didn't want to drive his own car for obvious reasons. He decided to keep it lo-tech—he took the train to Chicago, then a bus to Dayton. He paid in cash each time.

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He had his laptop and a cell phone with him. When he checked into his hotel, he had already come up with some false I.D. to flash at the uninterested clerk. He checked his bank account. It showed a deposit of five thousand dollars. Rainbow was a man, or woman, of integrity. Of course, five thousand for Phil was a drop in the ocean, but it was the principle that counted.

He logged in, using the cell phone instead of the hotel phone.

RAINBOW: Everybody in place?

Everyone was.

RAINBOW: How about the car, White?

WHITE: I got it. A black Voyager. People in the 'burbs should really be more careful.

BLUE: What about the plates?

WHITE: Already switched them. Followed a car into long-term parking at the airport. They won't notice the switch for a week.

ORANGE: I did a preliminary run at the security system. Piece of cake.

BLUE: Everybody packing who should be?

GREEN: You bet!

SCARLET: Just remember, we just point, not shoot.

PURPLE: Don't worry.

SCARLET: And one more thing—I'm a man, so don't be shocked.

BLUE: Really? Damn, I was going to look you up when it was over.

ORANGE: Well, I'm a woman, so drop *me* a line!

RAINBOW: All of you should lie low for a couple of weeks after the job. This isn't a singles club.

GREEN: See you guys in the morning. Eleven A.M.

Phil didn't sleep well. His alarm clock went off while he lay there, staring at it. He dressed in the same suit and overcoat he had worn on the trip, then pasted a fake mustache under his nose. A brown fedora and horn-rimmed glasses completed the obscuring of his already unmemorable face. The only hint of color was the scarlet tie.

He packed the laptop, cell phone, and his overnight belongings into a box addressed to his home and stopped by a post office to mail them. He was now unencumbered by anything other than the .45, safely tucked in a holster under his arm. He went into a telephone booth and got the local time.

His job was to watch the alley at the rear of the bank, then make his way inside at three minutes after eleven. As he walked down the street towards the bank, he spotted a black Voyager with a woman behind the wheel. She was wearing a white hat with a veil over her face, long white gloves, and a white raincoat. He didn't acknowledge her as he passed and turned into the side street that took him to the alley.

The back door was locked as he had expected. No one was near. At two minutes after eleven the electronic lock gave a faint click. He pulled on a pair of gloves, drew his gun, and entered the bank. Orange had deactivated the alarms.

The plan was to not waste anytime with the tellers but to intercept the daily delivery of cash from two men driving an armored car. The money was taken to the manager's office on the second floor. When he arrived, a woman with

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an orange scarf was standing there. She winked at him.

A young man with a green tie was covering the room with a shotgun while two men wearing blue and purple ties were busy binding the guards from the armored car, the manager, and a secretary. Five large bags lay by the desk. Each of them took one and hurried down the back stairs to the alley, where White was supposed to meet them.

She wasn't there.

"She's late," muttered Purple.

"I saw her down the street," said Phil.

They waited. No Voyager.

"I'll take a look," said Green. He ran around the side of the building. He was back in seconds.

"She's gone!" he shouted.

"Quiet," commanded Orange.

"Did we have a backup plan if she didn't show up?" worried Purple.

"She always showed up in the game," said Blue.

"Let's get out of here," said Phil. "Leave the money."

"What?" exclaimed Orange. "That's what we came for."

"We don't have a car," said Phil. "We'll be caught dead to rights lugging these bags around."

"He's right," said Blue, dropping his bag.

"Screw that," said Green, grabbing it. "Let's go. We'll steal a car."

An alarm went off behind them.

"You were supposed to kill the system!" Purple yelled.

"I did," said Orange. "*You* were supposed to tie those people up so they couldn't get loose."

"Run!" yelled Phil. He dropped his bag and charged down the alley, tossing his gun into a dumpster.

Sirens filled his ears. To his horror, shots rang out. He turned to see the young man in the green tie standing calmly in the middle of the alley, firing at the door they had just left. A police car careened around the corner and slammed into him, sending his body crashing at an odd angle into the dumpster.

Phil turned again to run and found himself facing the wrong end of a .38. He held up his hands.

At the precinct he made a call to a lawyer in his hometown. A day later, at the Federal District Court, he was taken into an interview booth.

"I don't believe this, Phil," said the lawyer. "They say you robbed a bank. It has to be some kind of mistake. What happened?"

"I robbed a bank," said Phil. "Me and five others."

"Five?" said the lawyer. "Then there's one they didn't get."

"Ms. White," said Phil. "She must have gotten cold feet."

"White," said the lawyer, jotting it down. "Do you know her first name?"

"No," said Phil. "And her name wasn't White, either. Look, you have to tell them it was just a game."

"A game?" said the lawyer, giving him a hard look. "Robbery isn't a game, Phil. Especially when you kill a guard in the process."

"What?"

"The kid with the shotgun killed a bank guard before the police car got him."

"Green killed someone?" whispered Phil.

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"The kid's name was Harris," said the lawyer. "He was an engineering student at M.I.T. What was with you guys? Every one of you was legit until this happened. Now, they're talking capital punishment."

"But Green wasn't supposed to kill anyone," explained Phil. "That wasn't the plan. He never killed anyone in Level Seven."

"What are you talking about?"

Phil explained everything from the beginning while the lawyer sat there, shaking his head.

"A game," said the lawyer. "But this was reality. Now there's a dead guard and a dead M.I.T student. Calling it a game doesn't qualify as a legal defense."

"Look," said Phil. "I can trade info about Rainbow. And two other robberies, one in McMinnville and one in St. Cloud."

"Maybe we can buy you a lesser sentence," said the lawyer. "I'll look into it and get back to you tomorrow."

The four of them were arraigned together, still wearing their signature neckwear. They were remanded to await the grand jury. Phil was taken back into a holding pen with Blue and Purple.

"I'm Phil," he said.

"Richard," said Blue. "I recognized you. We had a booth near yours at the Vegas software show in '94."

"Paul," said Purple. "My lawyer advised me not to talk to you guys any more."

"Fun while it lasted," muttered Phil.

His lawyer came to visit him the next day. "I checked out that website," he said. "It doesn't exist."

"I'm not surprised," said Phil. "I know guys who can track it down. We can still trade on the robberies, can't we?"

The lawyer looked at him. "There were no robberies, Phil," he said.

"What are you talking about?" shouted Phil. "There were two. There's going to be more. I downloaded the article from the McMinnville *Gazette-Herald* and the St. Cloud paper."

"There is no McMinnville Savings and Loan," said the lawyer. "There are two banks in the town, both with larger bank chains. There is no McMinnville *Gazette-Herald,* never has been. And although that St. Cloud paper does exist, the bank you said was robbed is fictitious. I searched the archives of the paper for every article on every bank robbery for the last two years, and none of them matches the information you gave me."

"*What's* going on?" said Phil.

"And there's one more thing," said the lawyer. "You said you sent bank account information to Rainbow?"

"Yes," said Phil, his heart sinking.

"Yesterday your home was burglarized. They took all the artwork and your more expensive toys, but most important, someone sat down at your computer and got into all your accounts. They hacked all of your personal info and got into your online brokerage account as well. You were cleaned out. Some electronic transfer. The bank is trying to figure it out. I checked with the lawyers for your fellow gang members. Same thing happened to

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them. But the big score was you, Phil."

"We were set up," marveled Phil. "The game, the anonymous e-mail, the fake bank robberies. The whole thing was designed to get us into a real robbery while they hacked into our accounts behind our backs."

"Seems like it," said the lawyer. "So you got nothing to trade, Phil. I think we can avoid the death penalty, but the Federal sentencing guidelines don't give us much leeway otherwise. I'm sorry, Phil."

"It was a really cool game," Phil said.

White, thought Phil. White was working with Rainbow. Or was Rainbow. White light contains all the colors. She watched from a safe distance while we abandoned geekdom forever.

They took Phil back to his cell. Three walls and a set of bars. No more monastic a room than many he had lived in before he made it big. That wasn't the problem.

There was no computer. There never would be another computer. And it was when he realized this that he knew he had entered Hacker Hell for eternity.

Note to Our Readers: *If you have difficulty finding* Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.*

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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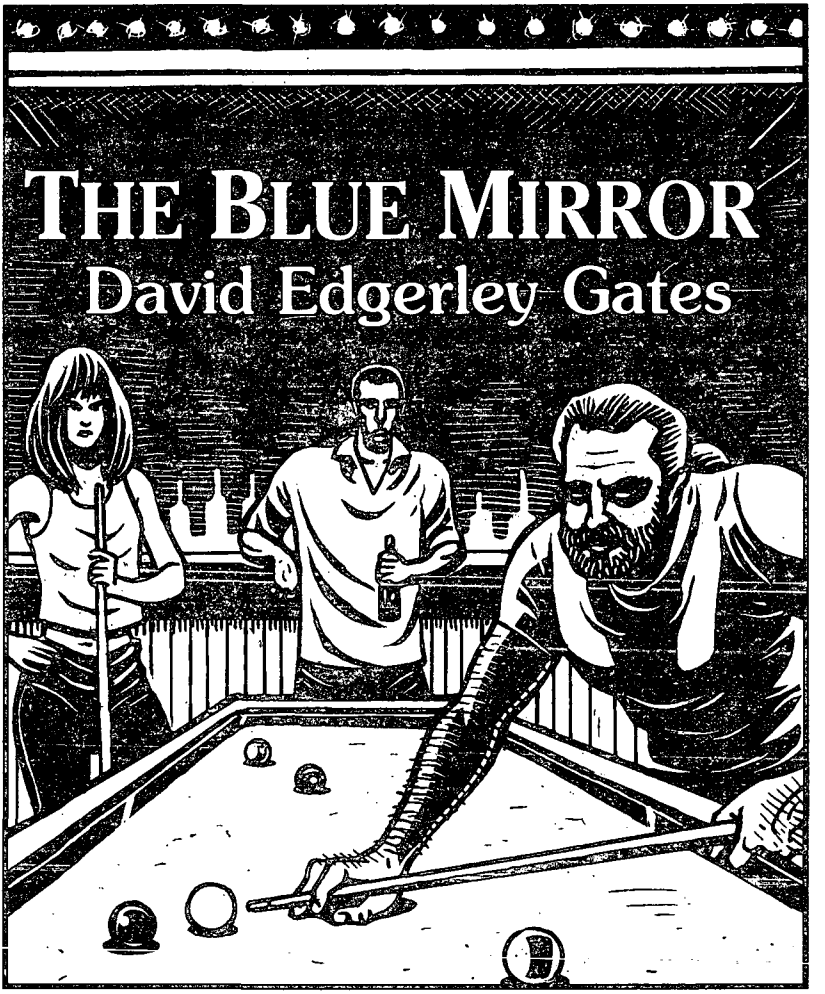
The Black Shoe Gang is stepping out tonight! We will give a prize of $25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "December Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the June Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

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THE BLUE MIRROR

David Edgerley Gates



"You know how long a tail gunner's supposed to last in combat?" Stanley asked me. "Twenty-four minutes, on average. Me, I beat the odds, did my fifty missions, came back to the States, went on a bond tour." He shook his head ruefully. "Now the cancer's got me, I won't live out the year."

I'd known Stanley Kosciusko most of my life. He came from Fitchburg, just north of Leominster, where me and my brother Tony grew up. There were quite a few Poles up there, close to the New Hampshire border, and a fair number of Finns, oddly.

The Poles had come originally to work in the paper and textile mills, the Finns to make furniture—Windsor chairs and dining room

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sets. Stanley had married a Finnish girl himself after the war. Maria Aho.

"You got to have an appreciation for life's little ironies, ain't it the truth?" he remarked.

Did his wife know? I wondered out loud.

"About the cancer, sure. This other thing, no." It was the other thing he'd come to talk to me about.

"I lied about my age," he went on. "Enlisted when I was seventeen. Wound up in a B-24 Liberator, flying out of Sicily bombing the Ploesti oilfields. Froze your ass off in those planes, but man, you'd sweat bullets when the German fighters came at you, Fockes and Messerschmitts. Anybody claims they weren't scared stiff is retarded or just plain crazy."

I was thinking about how old he was. Fifty-odd years since D-Day. Add it up, and Stanley was in his middle seventies. He still seemed vigorous enough, but now that I knew what to look for, I saw the tightness around his eyes from holding in the pain, and a metallic cast to his skin, tarnished and dull. In the afternoon sunlight coming in my office windows I noticed he'd used some kind of rouge or blush to give his face the color it lacked. I figured that was harmless enough.

"Your dad was in the war, wasn't he?" he asked.

"Different war," I said. "Korea."

Stanley nodded. "I knew that," he said, as if it were important for me to understand he still had all his buttons. He'd dressed for the occasion, too, like he had to impress me.

Stanley was a retired auto body man. Tony and I had hung around his shop on Saturday mornings when we were kids because Stanley could fix anything. You could take him your bike or a broken kitchen appliance your mom was ready to throw out or a Lionel locomotive with a bad armature, and he'd make it work. He loved tools, not just what he used on the job, breaker bars and socket sets and orbital sanders, but old hand tools like rabbeting planes and Yankee drills, miter boxes and shake splitters, anything that had a purpose because Stanley himself was purposeful. Me and Tony would hunt up objects in the abandoned mills and the local landfill just to have Stanley tell us what they were for. He'd examine a rusty, weathered thing, a spokeshave or a bit-and-brace with a corroded ratchet, and take it apart, clean it up, hone the bit or the blade, and put it back together so he could show you how well it suited your hand, you wanted to make a paper-tight join or dowel a table leg. He could repair a grandfather clock or a .22 rifle, and the trick was his curiosity, that certain knowledge that somebody else had made it, whatever it was, had designed it with a use in mind.

"I blame myself," Stanley said. "You have to own up to the responsibility for what you've done or haven't done."

"Cancer's not your fault, Stanley," I said.

"You think I don't know that?" He shifted his weight awkwardly, his suit making him self-conscious. "Jack, there's somebody looking to

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hurt me. Or my family, which amounts to the same thing."

His namesake was a Revolutionary War general who later went home to Poland and led a hopeless revolt against the Russians.

"Here's what I need you to do for me," he said. "I'm dying on the vine here. I got to have me a surrogate."

I could still see him breaking some Cossack's neck with his bare hands.

"See, if the damn Commies hadn't killed Stosh over in Vietnam, things'd be different," he said. "The way it is, I'm stuck with it. But me, I can't hardly lift a glass."

Life's little ironies. If somebody's going to be dead inside a year, what do you threaten him with? But more to the point, how do you turn him down when he asks you for help?

Here's the rest of what Stanley told me. I was explaining it to my brother Tony over a beer.

"Stanley Jr. died in Vietnam, right?" he asked.

"First Cav," I said.

Tony swung his wheelchair over to the sink. I'd just helped him move into this place, and he was still adjusting to being on his own. He'd resented being dependent, and once he was out of rehab, he didn't need nursing care but it was a big step all the same. He rinsed out his beer bottle and left it on the drainboard. "And there's a grandson?"

"Andy. Andy Ravenant. He took his stepfather's name after his mom remarried, but he and Stanley have always been close."

"Ravenant. Why's that name ring a bell?"

"You used to see his ads on late-night TV, after *Star Trek*. Raving Richie Ravenant. Sold rugs and wall-to-wall."

"Out in Lynn on the discount strip?"

"Next door to Adventure Car-Hop, home of the Ginsburger."

"He must do a pretty high volume," Tony said. "You'd think somebody would go after the carpet king, not Stanley."

"Except the stepdad's been dead for eight years, and Andy's mom lives in Florida."

"Puts a crimp in that line of inquiry."

"Assuming you were using Andy for leverage," I said.

"Unless it's the other way around."

I took my own bottle to the sink, rinsed it out, and got two more out of the fridge. I cracked the tops.

"Okay," Tony said, taking the beer I handed him, "why is whoever-this-is bothering Stanley? If they've got a beef with the kid, what's it have to do with the grandfather? And how did Stanley get wind of it anyway?"

Stanley was seeing a specialist out at Beth Israel, off the Jamaicaway. He's coming out of the hospital, headed for where he'd parked on Brookline Avenue, and some greaseball—Stanley's description—starts giving him a hard time.

"Explain that a little better," Tony said. "This guy comes out of nowhere?"

"Apparently," I said. "Stanley's like, hel-LO, what's *your* story?

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Homeless vet, willing to work for food?"

"I take it *not,* unhappily."

The guy's trying to act smooth, but he's antsy, like he has someplace else to be and this is just a pit stop.

"Coked up?" my brother asked.

"Good observation," I said. "Except that Stanley wouldn't know what to look for. I'm reading between the lines. The dude was looking over his shoulder."

"Sorry," Tony remarked, smiling. "You were saying?"

According to Stanley, the guy couldn't seem to get to the point, or it was like he was talking in code. He kept using these veiled, oblique references as if they were supposed to make sense to Stanley, and Stanley finally gets fed up and just steps around him. The other guy is so frustrated with Stanley for, like, *willfully* refusing to understand that he calls after him he'll send him his grandson's tongue in a pickle jar.

"This is the first overt mention of Andy, right?"

"Right. The rest of it's been this sly jive-ass hinting around."

"I can see this going one of two ways," Tony said. "Or one of *one,* namely Stanley dropkicking the guy to Chestnut Hill."

"Except that he's past seventy and he's on heavy medication and he doesn't know what any of it's about."

"So he suppresses his natural instinct to scrub the bricks with this yo-yo's face, not to mention that he's maybe no longer the man he once was, and he comes to you."

"Pretty much."

Tony pursed his lips. "Where do you start?" he asked.

"I start with Stanley's grandson."

"The kid."

"He's not a kid, exactly." In fact, Andy was close to my brother's age. He was thirty-one, an attorney. Criminal law, unglamorous but always in demand. He'd done a couple of years as a public defender in Suffolk Superior Court, and now he was in private practice, with an address downtown on Milk Street.

"You hoping that dog will hunt?" Tony asked.

"Andy's more likely to have enemies than his grandfather."

"Yeah, you'd think so," Tony said, but he seemed distracted by something, a thought hovering on the periphery.

"What?" I asked him.

"I can't put my finger on it," he said. "Maybe if I'd quit chasing after it, it would stop ducking out of sight."

The offices of Ravenant & Dwyer were at the bottom edge of the financial district, in the shadow of the Customs House tower. It was one of the oldest sections of town, built over again and again, but like the North End or Beacon Hill, you could still see an imprint of how Boston had once been laid out back in the eighteenth century when its commerce depended on shipping and the narrow, crooked streets led down to the harborfront. The traffic then would have been horse-drawn wagons and drays lurching over the cobblestones and the small

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businesses would have been ship's chandlers and jobbers, sailmakers' lofts and rope factories. It remained a commercial district, outlets for wholesale plumbing supplies and the like at street level, and the tenants in the offices on the upper stories were a similar mix of tradesmen and professionals, but they offered a different range of services these days. Andy's law office was one flight up, the entry door sharing a small landing with a jeweler and an architectural drafting studio. I had a ten o'clock appointment.

I gave the receptionist my name and sat down to wait.

I'd waited all of forty-five seconds when Andy Ravenant stepped out of an inner office, came through the small wicket that fenced the receptionist off from clients, and stuck out his hand as I got to my feet. We shook hands.

"I remember you and your brother from my grandfather's body shop," he told me, smiling.

I had a vague recollection of his father, Stan Jr., but I didn't remember Andy at all. Of course, if I'd been seven or eight, I wouldn't have paid much attention to some four-year-old kid if I didn't have to. I decided not to say that.

He took me into his office. It was small and lined with law books—Massachusetts General Statutes, extracts from federal rulings, bound trial transcripts. We sat down.

"Okay," Andy said, leaning back and tenting his hands in front of his sternum. "What's got Papa Stan's bowels in such an uproar? He's been evasive with me."

"Did you know he was dying of cancer?" I asked him. I knew it was sudden, but I couldn't afford to spare his feelings.

Andy sat up abruptly, his face frozen.

I made an apologetic gesture. "He's told your grandmother about it, and he told me yesterday," I said. "I guess he hasn't gotten around to making it general knowledge."

"Jesus," Andy said softly. "I knew he was coming into town for treatments, but I didn't realize how bad it was. He's such a tough old bastard. You figure somebody like that's going to die standing up. He won't go for being an invalid."

"Yeah, that's the way I read it," I said.

"Why did he come to see you, Jack?"

"Somebody threatened him," I said. "In actual point of fact, they threatened *you*. Why they'd go after Stanley I don't know. It seems sideways, or backwards."

"What was it about?"

"The guy didn't say, that's the trouble."

"Who was this guy?"

I shrugged. "Some cretin, according to your grandfather. Stanley didn't give me much to go on, but it sounded like he was supposed to warn you off something."

"My particular client base, that could mean damn near anything," Andy said. He picked up the phone and punched one of the intercom buttons. "Hey," he said, "you got a minute?" He paused and then nodded. "Bring him along," he said to whoever was on the line and hung up. "Let's check it out," he said.

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There was a light tap on the door, and two people came into Andy's office, a man and a woman.

I got up to shake hands as Andy made the introductions.

The woman was Catherine Dwyer, Andy's law partner. Kitty was of medium height with thick, dark hair cut short and that luminous Irish complexion, like Spode porcelain. She was very trim in a silk pants suit, but she would have turned heads if she'd been wearing jeans and a baggy sweatshirt. I felt awkward and foolish all of a sudden, as if we were on a first date.

The guy was Max Quinn, a big beefy job with a white sidewall haircut. He looked like an ex-cop, which is what he turned out to be, a private license who did legwork for Ravenant & Dwyer.

"Jack Thibault," he said, grinning. "I hearda you. You're the hockey player's brother."

"That'd be me," I agreed.

"What's the pitch?" he asked.

Andy gave them a quick outline, nothing about the cancer, just the fact that someone seemed to be using his grandfather to get at him.

Both of them picked up on it without needing more.

"Current caseload, what do you think?" Kitty asked, turning toward Max Quinn.

He pulled a face. "There's that little squirrel Donnie Argent," he told her. "He's tight with those bums in Revere, or he'd like us to think."

"Ring of chop shops," Kitty explained to me. "Who else?"

"The dopers over in Charlestown," Max said.

"That's one of mine," Andy told me. "Kids just getting into the heavy. Too scared to roll over on their wholesaler and plead out."

"I don't blame them," Quinn said. "That'd be Chip McGill."

"Something there?" Kitty asked him.

He shrugged. "You know that neighborhood, they're like the freaking Sicilians—*omérta*—or, anyway, before the made guys started falling over their own feet, they were in a rush to rat each other out to the Feds."

"Everybody dummies up," Kitty said to me. "Even these kids know better than to drop a dime on their connections."

"Who's Chip McGill?" I asked.

"Dealer," Quinn said. "Methamphetamine, mostly. Roofies, angel dust, some psychedelics. Party animal. Runs with a bunch of Hell's Angels wannabes, call themselves the Disciples."

"I thought they were out of Springfield," I said.

Quinn gave me a reappraising look. "Good call," he said.

"You figure they might be looking to open up a new market?" I asked him.

He nodded. "McGill's a local boy, grew up around Monument Square. Been in the rackets since God was a child. He cuts his overhead, he can get crystal direct from the source. It's a symbiotic relationship."

Symbiotic wasn't the kind of five dollar word I expected to be in Max Quinn's vocabulary. It must have shown on my face.

He grinned. "It's what you get,

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you hang around with these college kids," he said.

McGill and the bikers sounded promising, and I said so.

"I see a downside to this," Kitty Dwyer said.

Quinn and I looked at her.

"If it doesn't have anything to do with McGill and Jack starts sniffing around him, it's going to raise a red flag," she said. "We could regret it."

"McGill's got no reason to think our clients are about to testify against him," Andy put in, "and we wouldn't want to give him one, but that's the lawyer in me talking."

"Makes our situation a little ticklish," Quinn observed.

He didn't actually seem that bothered by it. I figured his way would be to jam McGill up and take whatever came next.

Kitty thought the same, apparently. "You know, Max, a full frontal assault might be counterproductive," she commented.

"Shortest distance between two points," he said. "You got your Polish grandfather on the one hand, and you got Chip McGill on the other. I'd sooner take McGill off the board."

"So would I," Andy said. "I know we've got an obligation to those kids, Kitty, they're our clients, but if Chip McGill is trying to muscle Papa Stan, I vote we ask him about it."

"Ask?" Quinn didn't sound too thrilled.

"Feel him out, I mean," Andy said. "If he's got legitimate concerns, we put his mind at rest."

It sounded a little too much like a euphemism for me. Andy seemed to be giving Quinn the go-ahead to lean on McGill.

"Your grandfather went to Jack, remember, he didn't come to you," Kitty said. "Maybe he doesn't want us involved."

Quinn gave her a sleepy glance.

"Well?" Andy was looking at me. "What do you say to that, Jack? You want to fly solo?"

"Give me a day, maybe," I said.

"Max?" Andy asked him.

"No problem," Quinn said.

"Watch your step," Kitty Dwyer said to me.

Did she mean with Max or McGill? I wondered.

"You'll keep us in the loop?" Andy asked.

"Of course," I said.

Kitty walked me out, leaving Quinn and Andy together. She could have wanted a minute alone with me, and she seemed to be making up her mind whether or not to tell me something. We were out on the landing at the top of the stairs when she spoke up.

"It might be personal," she said.

"You mean, nothing to do with one of the law firm's cases?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Andy have any skeletons in his closet?"

"I'm not the one to ask," she said, which only suggested to me that she was.

"If you think of something, will you give me a call?"

"I was thinking I'd call you anyway," she said, smiling.

I wasn't quite sure what to make of that, but I was all too aware of her eyes on my back as I went down to the street.

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I'd parked over by India Wharf. I was walking back along the waterfront toward my car when I passed an espresso bar with an outside deck and decided to get a cup of coffee. I went in and ordered a latte and took it out onto the deck, where I could sip it and look at the harbor.

It was Indian summer, late October, when the nights are crisp but during the day it can be almost balmy. The sky was nearly cloudless, and sunlight glanced off the oily water. Herring gulls swooped for floating trash and fought over it when they got something. A container ship moved down the channel, headed out toward the bay. It might be going up the coast to the Maritimes or south through the Cape Cod Canal to New York or the mouth of the Chesapeake.

There is a romance to ships, to cast off on a voyage and leave the land behind. The sea is a different place, with different rules, where the hopes and vanities of men have small effect. The kinds of problems I dealt with in my line of work usually boiled down to basic, base motivations. Envy. Lust. Greed. They might seem like primal forces of nature to the people they took possession of, but if you balanced them against the brute power of the North Atlantic, they stood for nothing.

It helped to put things in a healthier perspective. I thought about Stanley in the belly of a bomber, where life could be measured in moments, the flak and the German fighters, the odds against survival. I finished my coffee and turned away from the briny smell of the harbor, the moving water slopping at the pilings, and went inside to use the pay phone.

I called a cop I knew downtown. Frank Dugan owed me a favor, and I was lucky enough to catch him at his desk. There was an open case file on the Disciples, he told me, going back a few years.

"They're a pretty strong presence, the Springfield-Hartford corridor, out in the Berkshires, too," Dugan said. "A while back DEA and the state cops ran an operation against them, shut down a lot of their traffic, busted some cookers, but the gang bounced back. That's the trouble with speed. Doesn't take much to set up a lab, you figure a way to mask the odors."

"What about the recipe?"

Ingredients weren't that hard to come by, he explained.

"Basic pharmaceutical supplies, ephedrine, phenylacetone, hydrocholoric acid. Thing to look out for, it's dangerous, cooking meth. You're working with volatile materials, you can blow yourself up. And then there's the fumes. That's a giveaway, the smell of acetone and ammonia, like nail polish or cat urine, plus you got your toxic slurry, four or five pounds of waste for each pound of product. Two ways to go. You stake out an industrial area with a lot of smudge and smut, or you go out in the boonies where the neighbors don't complain."

"So it's messy, and it stinks, and it's an explosive mix," I said. "Which makes it sound perfect for a crew of sociopathic losers like these outlaw bikers."

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I could hear Dugan sucking on his teeth. "Far be it from me to step on your toes, Jack, but the Disciples are a seriously mean outfit. How'd you fasten onto this?"

"Guy name of Chip McGill, over in Charlestown," I told him. "I heard they were his new source for product."

There was an even longer silence this time around.

I waited him out.

"You sure know how to pick 'em," he said at last. "You're headed for a long walk off a short pier, you fish *that* water."

"Care to give me a little more detail?"

"Okay. Chip McGill's the type, he's burning the candle at both ends. He's a loose cannon, and sooner or later the Bunker Hill boys are going to take him out. I'm kind of surprised he hasn't already turned up in the trunk of a parked car out in the long-term lot at Logan."

Long-term parking at the airport was a favored method of putting a dead body on ice. It did double duty. First, the crime scene was stale by the time Homicide got to it, but there was a secondary benefit. A corpse left unattended swells with fluids and eventually bursts and putrefies. Nobody wants their family to see them like that. So it was an object lesson.

"Anyway, your little pal there, this McGill, he's a bad apple, take my word for it," Dugan went on. "He's got a sheet going back to juvie, he's done time for distribution, he's been pulled in on assault, conspiracy, murder. Whether it stuck to him or not, we're talking mainline hood here. He's been on the radar a while. Major Crimes wants him bad."

"I don't know as that's really my lookout, Frank," I said. "I just don't want to accidentally stumble into a rat's nest."

"You will be, you try to put the arm on this chump."

"Far as I know, McGill is in the background," I said, "part of the scenery."

"I think you're horsing me around, but I guess it's not for me to say," he remarked. "My advice would be to walk away."

"I'm not out to bust the guy's chops. All I want is a quiet word."

"Chip McGill is a nut job, and a speed freak on top of it," Dugan said. "Give him an excuse, he'll whack you out."

"Well, that's not very encouraging," I said.

"It's not supposed to be. The point is, all you have to do is wait about six months, and he won't be a problem."

"Yeah, I understood you the first time. Somebody with a bone to pick is likely to put the guy in the ground. Trouble is that I don't have six months to wait."

"Do what you gotta do," Dugan said.

"What about habits and habitat?" I asked him.

"He holds court at a joint called the Blue Mirror, by the Navy Yard. You know it?"

I was afraid I did.

"Most every afternoon between four and six. Happy Hour."

"That's pretty deep in Indian Country," I said.

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"I've been trying to tell you," Dugan said cheerfully and hung up.

Boston is a town known for its tough, parochial neighborhoods, Southie, Charlestown, the North End, Fields Corner and Savin Hill in Dorchester, and the neighborhood bars that cater to the locals are often like ethnic social clubs, friendly and familiar to initiates but suspicious of outsiders.

The Blue Mirror was in Charlestown, right outside the main gates of the Navy Yard, where the USS *Constitution* is berthed.

The yard's fallen on hard times since the seventies, deactivated with defense cutbacks, new keels being laid at Bath Iron Works in Maine and down at Norfolk and out on the West Coast in Puget Sound. Developers have had their eye on it over the years and now it's a National Historic Site, but as a shipbuilding facility and a port of call for bluewater sailors, it's been mothballed. Even when the yard was an active military installation, though, the Blue Mirror was off-limits to enlisted personnel.

There were rougher places, I'm sure, but you probably had to go to Belfast or Kingston, Jamaica, to find them. All the same, at four thirty in the afternoon it looked pretty tame. A couple of dozen vehicles were parked outside, vans, pickups, muscle cars, along with some choppers, low-slung panhead Harleys sporting ape-hangers and chromed valve covers. I went on in.

It took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the gloom. The room was long and low, opening up like a keyhole at the far end, where there was a small hardwood dancefloor and a band was doing a sound check, testing levels. The bar itself ran along the near wall, probably thirty-five or forty feet, with two guys working behind the stick. The only lighting was a set of pinpoint spots down the back bar, the narrow focus putting the bottles on the shelves in high relief, and making the liquor seem lit from within, like coals. Having the light behind them, the bartenders were in silhouette, so their faces were unreadable. The effect was a little sinister, but I guessed it might even be intentional, giving them the edge on a rowdy crowd when the clock edged last call.

They had Sam Adams on tap. I ordered a draft. Glancing down at the bar, I saw there seemed to be loose change scattered all over it, but when I tried to nudge a dime with my finger, I realized the coins were polyurethaned into the surface. It made me feel like a dope for falling for it, and it marked me as a stranger in a place where I wanted to be taken for furniture. I nursed my beer and looked around.

Given that it was a little shy of quitting time for a day job, the Mirror was pretty busy, and most of the people in there were guys. Not many of them were dressed like they'd come from work, either. Nobody in coveralls wearing a hammer holster or spattered with paint, anyway. Everyone seemed to be wearing aggressive casual, doubleknits or Dockers depending on the age bracket.

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I picked up my beer and wandered down the bar toward the bandstand. Tucked around the corner was a pool table, a quarter a game. The guy leaning over the table to break was wearing colors, biker leathers with an elaborate design on the back like an old Grateful Dead album. He broke open the rack but didn't make any balls, and when he straightened up, I could make out the gang insignia better. It looked like a representation of Leonardo's *Last Supper* but with Satan at the head of the table. Hitler, Idi Amin, and the Ayatollah were among his guests. Underneath, in Gothic script, was a legend that read THE DISCIPLES. I turned back to the bar, ordered a second beer, and asked for my change in quarters.

The girl the biker was playing pool with looked underage, strung-out sixteen, no more than a hundred pounds wringing wet, tie-dyed tank top and jeans she kept tugging up because she didn't have any hips for them to hang onto. But she had tattoos across her shoulder blades and enough piercing to set off a metal detector—ear clips and a stud in her lower lip and one at the outer edge of each eyelid, the extreme outer edge where it wouldn't scratch the sclera of her eyes if she looked sideways. She made five solids without breaking a sweat and then scratched with a cross-corner shot on the seven.

I stepped over and put my quarter up for the next game.

Neither one of them seemed to pay any attention to me. The biker was studying the way the table lay. He was shooting stripes, and he had two pockets safed, his balls hanging on the lip, duck shots, but in the way of her making a ball. He took a harder shot, banking one up and back, and made it. She thumped her cue on the floor, acknowledging a good call. He kept moving around the table, sinking his other six balls, and then blew the eight, slamming it too hard so it popped back out of the side pocket. The girl dropped the rest of the solids and sank the eight in a corner. She glanced over at me.

It was probably then that I made my first mistake. I'd assumed they were a couple, although the biker had a good twenty years on her. He had red hair pulled back in a shaggy ponytail, and you could see the streaks of grey in it. And he had kind of a Zapata mustache, drooping past the corners of his mouth. It showed white next to his chin. The mistake was that I spent more time on him than her. Young girl, but skinny as she was, I still should have been looking down the front of her shirt after I put my money in, the balls dropped and I racked, and she bent over the table to break. Anybody else would have.

Like a dummy I went for the target too quickly. The girl was running the table on me, and I stood back a little, just outside the edge of the light that picked out the balls on the green felt, making the colors pop. She made six balls before I got a shot, and then she left me safed behind one of her own high balls. I called a bank, made it by some miracle, and then blew a much easier shot on the four in the side. I

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stepped away from the table again shrugging philosophically and went to stand next to the redheaded biker. "Need to get my chops up, I guess," I remarked.

"Girl plays a mean stick," he said.

She took the eight on a long bank, back up in the corner, and he went over to the table to rack. I put another quarter up to play the winner.

The thing was, their concentration on the game wasn't fierce at all. The girl played deliberately but not as if anything were at stake. Her pride wasn't involved. She simply took each shot as it came and seemed to be playing more against herself than the biker. For his part, it didn't bother him if she had the better eye and control of the cue ball with english that would have made Minnesota Fats and Fast Eddie Felton give her a second look. He wasn't indifferent, or just humoring her, but he wasn't threatened by it.

I was watching him bridge to make a shot when I saw the jailhouse tattoo on the web of skin between his thumb and forefinger: 1%. It took me a minute to get it. One percent.

Back when Marlon Brando made *The Wild One* and biker gangs were exotic, some square made the remark that motorcycles were ridden by family men and it was only that one percent that gave bikes a bad name. Now, anybody who's hung out with bikers knows they can be family men, for openers, but that's not the point.

Bikes have never lived down that outlaw image, and of course it's part of their appeal, especially riding a big Harley instead of a rice-burner, but Red was flaunting it. The colors, the attitude. Maybe he was for real, or maybe it was all show and no go. I had a funny feeling he was profiling, trying it on for size, and trying just a little too hard.

When he missed a shot and came back to where I was standing, leaving the table to the girl, I made a clumsy remark about speed. I wasn't trying for subtlety, mind you, but it was all too obvious what I was fishing for.

"You looking to score some flake?" He sounded almost bored with the transaction.

"Weight, not just a couple of lines," I said.

He nodded, not bothering to look at me, still watching the girl shoot pool. "I think you mistook me for somebody else," he said without glancing in my direction.

I shrugged. "I figured to cut out the middleman," I told him. "McGill steps on his product because he's trying to make up in volume what he uses himself. I've got motivated buyers but they don't like being cheated, and maybe it's time you found a new pipeline."

"Sing a different song, bro," he remarked edgily.

"He'll bring you all down, you don't jerk his leash," I said.

He looked at me finally, losing patience. "I'm trying to shoot a game here," he said. "You're rubbing up too close, and it's giving me a rash."

"You don't think Chip McGill's a loose cannon?" I asked. "How come he's trying to muscle Andy

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Ravenant, then? Seems like a good way to attract the wrong kind of attention."

I had Red's interest now, but I didn't think I'd struck a nerve. It was more puzzled curiosity, like how'd I come up with this angle and where the hell was I going with it.

"I hear Ravenant's defending a couple of neighborhood kids on a drug fall, but he can't plead them out unless they agree to burn Chip," I told him. "Think there's anything to it?"

"What in the name of sweet Jesus Christ is your game, pal?" he asked.

"I travel in a lot of weird company," I said. "I make connections. That's my stock in trade, putting things together. I'm what they call a rainmaker, seeding the clouds."

"You're a goddamn parasite," Red said.

"Whatever," I said. "I'm still in the market."

He leaned his cue against the wall. "Let's go out back for a taste, where we can talk more private," he said.

He went through the fire door behind him, and I followed. We were outside by the dumpster behind the building. His bike was on its kickstand there. He opened the saddlebags and felt around inside. It was still light out, the sky pearling toward dusk, the shadows long across parking lot. The girl came out through the fire door.

"Hey, darlin'," Red said.

"Hey yourself," she said. "I'm starting to flag."

"Got what you need," he said, straightening up with a small Baggie in his hand.

And that was my second mistake, if anybody's counting, to be watching him instead of watching my back, figuring her for a crank slut out to score a free pop. She kicked me so hard in the back of the knee that I went cross-eyed from the pain as my leg collapsed, and the two of them were on top of me like a snake on soap. She jerked the .40 Smith out of my waistband at the small of my back and wedged the muzzle into the base of my skull, notching the hammer back. The oily click sounded like a twig breaking. Red pinched the bridge of my nose between his knuckles and forced my head back, the gun digging into my spinal cord. I felt dizzy and ready to throw up. The girl giggled.

"No cop with any street sense would be that obvious," Red said, leaning down to stick his face into mine. "You take the cake for stupid, bud."

He had that part right. Stupid was my middle name.

"I ask myself, what's your stake in it? And what I come up with is, you're on your own. So what's this jive you're giving me about Chip McGill and the lawyer? My guess is you're running interference for somebody, so who sent you?"

My mind wasn't working fast enough to come up with a plausible answer. They say the prospect of an imminent hanging is supposed to sharpen your faculties, but a psychopathic meth groupie holding a gun to my head had filled it with white noise.

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My tank was dry, and I was sucking air.

"Now, darlin', you best let me have that thing," Red said. "I think you're liable to pop a cap on this old boy afore I even have the chance to loosen his tongue."

He might have put his thumb between the hammer and the frame as he slipped the gun away from her, but I wasn't breathing any easier. She could have shot me by accident, or just to see which way my brains went on the pavement. Red was likely to shoot me on purpose, if I couldn't talk him out of it.

"Care to set my mind at rest, bro?" he asked me.

He'd let go of my nose and the Smith wasn't cutting into my neck any more, but I was scared to tell him nothing and just as nervous about saying something dumb.

"I can't *hear* you," he crooned, leaning close again like a father confessor.

"Hear *this?*" another voice inquired, and the next sound was unmistakable, the slide on a pump shotgun being racked.

Red went absolutely still.

"We'll do this by the numbers," the new guy said. I'd heard his voice before, but I couldn't place it. "Point the weapon away from your body and safe it." Red uncocked the Smith. "Good. Now put it down and back away. You too, girlie. I got no compunction about taking you off at the knees."

I felt them give me some room. I glanced around.

"You're looking a little the worse for wear, Jack," Max Quinn said to me, grinning. He was holding a Mossberg pump at port arms, relaxed and obviously enjoying himself. "You able to walk?"

I picked up my gun and got carefully to my feet. I had to favor my left leg to get it to hold my weight.

"Now, about these two," Max said.

I had some ideas on that score, but what I wanted to do was likely to see me pulling eight to ten at MCI Cedar Junction.

"No?" Max asked. He shrugged. "Well, in that case, we'll take our leave of you lovely people," he said to Red and the girl. "I'd think it right intelligent if you'd just lie down on the pavement until we left."

The girl hadn't even looked at me while this whole business was going on, but Red was watching me with a hostile squint.

"I meant *now,* people," Max said.

They got down and assumed the position.

I limped toward my car, and Max backed away behind me, the shotgun held down next to his leg, where it was less conspicuous.

The lights were coming on in the parking lot.

He leaned down to the window when I got behind the wheel. "This probably isn't the place to talk," he said.

"I'll call you," I said. "Thanks."

"No sweat," he told me.

I watched him cross the street to where he was parked and put the shotgun in his trunk. He'd probably had me under surveillance from the time I walked into the bar. I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth, but it seemed a little too convenient.

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Max gave me a wave as I drove away and climbed into his own car. I went home to pack my sore knee in ice and brood about how big a dope I'd been.

"So you figure the bikers are a red herring?" Tony asked the next morning.

"I don't know," I told him. "I think Quinn set me up, yes, but that doesn't mean they're not dirty."

"Quinn just wants make himself look good?"

"Pulling my chestnuts out of the fire? That's one way of looking at it. Or he could be using me as a stalking horse, get them looking in the wrong direction."

"Andy Ravenant?"

"Yeah, something's hinky," I said. "But I don't see how it connects to the Stanley problem."

We were driving out to the hospital in Ayer to see Stanley. He'd collapsed the day before while I was busy getting myself washed, dried, and folded. He wasn't home, he was out cruising junkyards or something, up in apple orchard country, and the paramedics got him to the closest ICU. Once he was stabilized, he'd probably be moved into town to Peter Bent Brigham if things still looked bad.

"Any other irons in the fire?"

I shook my head. "I was hoping Stanley might come up with something else I could use," I said. "Only trouble is, I've got nothing to give him in return."

The hospital was fairly new, built sometime in the early seventies, I guessed. It was on a rise north of town, set off from neighbors, with a view through the trees to a small pond. A lot of the country villages beyond 495, the outer beltway, have become bedroom communities for the high-tech industries along Route 128, but Ayer is an anomaly. It sits outside the main gates of Ft. Devens, and for a good sixty years or more it's been a company town supported by the army presence. Now there was talk of closing down the post. There was still a squadron of Ranger choppers based out there, and some logistical and support operations, but there was no longer a captive population of enlisted dependents and the rental market was going down the tubes. Not a bad thing considering how local landlords had gouged the GI's with inflated rates. And the used car dealers out on the Shirley road no longer had such easy prey. But the downside was that the bottom had fallen out of the tax base, and maintaining a decent hospital was suddenly a squeeze.

Tony wasn't crazy about the hospital scene in any case. He'd spent too much time helpless on his back after he'd gotten creamed on the ice, but he was still game to go in and visit Stanley. I got his wheelchair out of the back seat, unfolded it, and helped him lever himself out of the front seat and into it. I was awkward about it, but Tony had long since gotten over any embarrassment.

"How's your leg?" he asked.

I had an Ace bandage wrapped around my knee, but the tendon was still badly swollen and it felt like I had a lemon wedged behind

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the joint. I couldn't bend my leg, and I couldn't put any weight on it, either. Not that I didn't feel foolish, since it was my own fault.

"Shouldn't have turned your back on a woman," Tony said.

"Don't get me started," I told him.

"I didn't mean it that way," Tony said. "It's not about sex, or gender, or whether she's a victim herself. I only meant you shouldn't take anything for granted."

The thing about being brothers is that you figure you're always in competition one way or another, but then they somehow manage to sneak under your radar.

We made our way through the automatic doors into the lobby.

Stanley was down the hall in a private room. We startled Maria when we went in. I realized she'd dozed off sitting next to Stanley's bed, and it took her a moment to gather her wits.

Tony unbridled the charm. He had a gift for it, an effortless interest, because it was genuine. He rolled his wheelchair over next to Maria, not so close he was crowding her space but making himself available. I didn't hear what he said to her, but she smiled bravely and took his hand.

Stanley seemed to be just coming to, floating in a sea of painkillers and barely breaking water. I had the feeling he was losing buoyancy. He made an effort to focus.

"Hey," I said, leaning in close so he'd recognize me.

"Jack," he whispered, hoarsely. "Who's that with you?"

"My brother Tony," I told him.

He nodded, smiling, his eyes fluttering closed. "Always liked having you two come around," he murmured. "Liked having kids at the shop. Reminded me of Stosh. Kept me alive during the war, knowing I had a boy I had to come home to." His concentration was drifting, the drugs in the intravenous drip clouding his thoughts. He'd cut his moorings and was headed out to sea. "The Blue Mirror," he muttered indistinctly.

I thought I'd misheard him. "What?" I asked, too sharply.

Tony had caught it. He swiveled around.

Stanley was in a reverie. "That's what we used to call it, the Adriatic," he said, so softly I had to bend over the bed.

"The blue mirror. On bombing runs into Rumania. Before you had to worry about the fighters. It looked beautiful, but it was hard as iron if your plane went down. I used to write letters to my son in my head, but I always forgot them by the time we got back."

I glanced at Tony.

"I always forgot," Stanley whispered, sinking back into the pillows, exhausted.

I straightened up.

Tony caught my attention, and belatedly I went over to pay my respects to Maria. I always feel awkward in situations where I have to pretend everything's swell. I get claustrophobic, and look for an early avenue of escape. Tony smoothed us out of it, covering our retreat.

We were just ducking out the door when Stanley revived long enough to say something else. "Bees," he said, and fell back.

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"Bees?" I asked Tony. I was driving him home, and he was sunk in his own thoughts. I figured he was brooding about the transience of human endeavor and Stanley in particular, but I'd missed a turn in the road while Tony had taken it.

"Guy name of Creek Fortier, you remember him?" Tony asked.

That was going back a ways. "Big guy with a beard, kind of rough around the edges but basically shy?"

Tony nodded. "Rode a thousand-CC Vincent," he said.

"Right," I said as the details started coming back to me. "Used to pull into Stanley's shop once in a while, looking to cannibalize scrap. I remember the bike, a Shadow or a Lightning he'd restored. Why, what about him?"

"He was in Vietnam with Stanley's son Stosh."

I didn't know where Tony was going, but I was willing to hitch a ride.

"Fortier came back, but Stan Jr. didn't," I said. "You're thinking what?"

"I'm wondering if Creek Fortier weren't a kind of surrogate son," Tony said. "A way for Stanley to hang onto Stosh."

"It's a reach, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah," Tony said, "but I knew there was something floating around in my head that I couldn't put a name to. The kid, Andy, he would have been four or five years old at the outside, so you and me, we were too grown up to pay him any mind, right? He was underfoot, we probably treated him like the measles."

I'd thought the same thing when I saw Andy in his office. When you're in third or fourth grade, you don't want some "baby" dragging on your coattails.

"Here's how I remember it, though," Tony went on. "Creek Fortier always had the time to humor Andy whenever he came by Stanley's. It was like he was more comfortable on a kid's level than he was with adults."

"You see something unhealthy there?"

"No, that's not what I'm getting at," Tony said. "There was something *simple* about him, in the old fashioned sense, like he was a case of arrested development."

"Post-traumatic stress disorder?" I suggested.

Tony nodded. "Yeah, shell-shock, battle fatigue, whatever you want to call it. Stanley was always very protective, looked out for him, treated him gently."

"Walking wounded," I said.

"More than that," Tony said. "I mean, not just being a good Christian. We both know Stanley's a decent guy. I'm thinking he appointed himself Creek's guardian angel, ran interference for him, paid off his bad debts. Basically assumed the burden, in other words."

"Stanley lost a son, and Creek Fortier stood in for him."

"I hadn't thought about it for years," Tony said. "Fortier had a place out in the sticks, up by Pepperell or Townsend, near the New Hampshire line. Worked on bikes, raised his own vegetables. Stanley used to say he was a pioneer, born in the wrong century."

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"You've got a better memory than I do," I told him.

"It's what Stanley said that brought it back."

"Which?" I asked him.

"Creek Fortier cultivated bees," Tony said.

I called Andy Ravenant's office with a couple of questions, but Andy wasn't there and Max Quinn hadn't clocked in at all. I wanted to talk to Max, not least to thank him, although I wanted my ducks in a row first because I wasn't certain just where he stood. Then the receptionist put me on hold, and when the phone was picked up again, it was Kitty Dwyer on the line.

"How'd you make out?" she asked me.

I didn't know that I was any more ready to talk to Kitty than Max, but you can't script every encounter. "Well, there's good news and bad news," I told her, shifting mental gears. "I got my tail caught in a crack, but maybe I pushed some buttons. I don't know for sure. Max bailed me out of a jam anyway."

"*Max?* How so?"

"One of those things," I said. "You needed to be there."

"You mean more background than you want to go into over the phone?"

"I mean I'm not ready to confide in you, frankly," I said.

"Meet you for a drink after work?"

I hesitated and then took the plunge. "Sure," I said.

"Sun's already past the yardarm," Kitty said.

That was true. I hadn't gotten back to town until three in the afternoon. "I think I take your meaning," I told her.

"Let's close up shop, then," she said.

We met at a bar in the financial district, busy enough with suits stopping on their way home that we didn't attract any attention and just loud enough for personal conversations not to be overheard. It was a good choice. Too many people think a meeting should be held in a deserted place; it's actually the reverse. Kitty knew a crowd gave better cover, and the ambient noise made a wire unreliable.

"So?" she asked as we put our drinks on a corner table.

I shrugged. "You guys gave me the bait, and I took it," I said. "I don't know how deep Ravenant & Dwyer is in, but you're in deep enough to be worried about it."

She didn't fence. "I don't want to be disbarred," she told me, "but I don't want to put Andy in the hot seat."

"Is it that narrow a choice?"

"Most of our choices come down to self-interest," she said.

"That's open to definition," I said. "What about Max?"

"What about him?"

"How'd you recruit his services, for openers?"

"He came to us from the states. Max had good connections."

"Inside, you mean."

"He's got a lot of markers to call in."

"Cops and private dicks don't get on that well as a rule," I said. "Then again, a lot of private dicks used to be cops."

"The old blue network," she said.

"Did he leave the state police under a cloud?"

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"How do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Kitty," I said. "Did he take early retirement? Was he being investigated by Internal Affairs? Did he cut corners? What?"

She rolled her eyes. "Max is *sui generis,*" she said. "He worked a lot of undercover, drug stings, bribery, payoffs, you name it. He made enemies. But he made good busts, arrests that stuck. Andy was a PD, remember, but he respected Max."

I understood what she meant. A public defender would smell out a dirty cop. "Andy knew Max from before?" I asked her.

"Sure," she said.

I was trying to make something compute and couldn't do the math.

"What exactly is bothering you, Jack?" Kitty asked.

"Max steered me in the direction of the bikers, and then he was there to save my bacon when I ran into grief."

She didn't wonder what kind of grief I'd run into. "What's the problem with that?" she asked. "He's using you as a blind? We're defending a couple of kids on a trafficking rap. If we can make a case for intimidation, witness tampering, the whole nine yards, maybe we can buy them a little less time. Max Quinn is just doing his job."

"Who are you trying to convince?" I asked her. "This isn't a summation in front of a jury."

She hadn't touched her drink. She fiddled with the stem of her glass.

"I don't feature it, either," she admitted.

"What's his game, then?"

"Oh for Christ's sake, Jack, stop jerking me around," she said, fiercely. "You know goddamn well what he's up to, and he doesn't give a rat's ass if he takes us down, too."

I was startled by her vehemence and realized there were tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. I didn't think she was acting, either.

She swallowed, gulping down her sorrow. "Max is using *you?* How do you think *I* feel?" she demanded.

Probably like crap, I thought. "Confused," I said.

"You are *not* a lot of help," Kitty said, scrubbing her eyes angrily on her sleeve.

Up until then I hadn't wanted to be.

"This isn't going the way I'd hoped," she muttered.

"Me, either," I told her.

"Well, that's a small relief," she said.

I didn't know what to make of that remark.

"You want me to put it into words, don't you? Okay," she said. "You think Max Quinn is using his job at Ravenant & Dwyer as leverage. So do I. He's collecting proprietary client information to make a case against Chip McGill for the states. It'll never stand up in court, if it comes out, because the evidence would be tainted and none of it admissible, but he can set them up, all of them, McGill and the bikers, and the state police can tell a judge we have a Confidential Source, somebody inside, and the judge will go along with it."

"But how much does Max know?"

"Not enough, obviously. That's where you come in."

"Working under attorney privilege for Ravenant & Dwyer."

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"Which could put me and Andy both in the toilet."

I saw that. How could you claim to be oblivious? You were either unscrupulous or incompetent.

Kitty sighed. "This is a no-win situation," she said.

"Looks that way," I said. "Max is working from a stacked deck. But even if all of this is true, what's his handle on Andy? Or are you saying that Andy could have been in on it from the get-go, that he's a party to it?"

"I don't believe that."

"Don't believe it or can't bring yourself to?"

She gave that a moment's thought. "No, it's not wishful thinking," she said finally. "I don't believe it because it's not in Andy's character. It runs counter to what *he* believes in. The practice of law may be adversarial, but you hope it all balances out, on average."

"Okay," I said.

I must have sounded unconvinced. "Jack," she explained, "Andy Ravenant is a straight arrow. Not a Boy Scout but a guy who honors the law, even if it's an imperfect instrument. And that's as much a weakness as it is a strength in this trade. The point is, he wouldn't countenance unlawful means even if they led to a desirable end."

"Okay," I said again, smiling this time. "Let's make sure we're reading off the same page, here. We both figure Max Quinn sees Chip McGill as a target of opportunity, and helping Major Crimes take him out would put Max in solid with the AG's office and the old blues. The fact that you guys are defending a couple of kids who might be persuaded to rat McGill out gives Max an angle, and the fact that Andy's grandfather is involved makes for a strong pressure point, although you don't think Andy will fold."

"I *know* so," Kitty said.

I didn't have quite her confidence but let it go. "Does Andy have power of attorney for his grandfather?" I asked her.

"I couldn't tell you even if I knew," she said. "Why?"

"Stanley's in Intensive Care," I told her. "He might be on his way to the back exit."

"Oh my God," she said, shocked. "That's why Andy isn't at the office. He should have said something."

It occurred to me why he hadn't, and Kitty worked it out in the next heartbeat.

"He didn't want Max to know," she said, staring up at me.

I was already standing, fishing for my wallet. I dropped a ten on the table and put my glass on top of it.

Kitty was right behind me as I made for the door. "What is it?" she demanded, catching up with me on the sidewalk.

"I don't think Andy's at the hospital with Stanley," I told her. "You have a cell phone?"

She pulled it out of her handbag as we hoofed it down the block to my car. I unlocked the passenger door, and Kitty climbed in, reaching across the seat to unlock the driver's door as I limped around.

"I don't know the number," I said as I got behind the wheel. "It's a listing in Ayer. See if you can get through to Admitting."

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Kitty was already punching up Directory Assistance.

I pulled out into the traffic, headed for the expressway. It was the wrong time of day and we'd be fighting rush-hour on the Mystic Bridge approaches, but I figured the McGrath & O'Brien was our best bet to get to Route 2. It was the same road I'd traveled that morning with Tony.

"You want to know whether Andy's there?" she asked me.

"No harm in asking," I said, jumping an intersection, "but I want to find out where the EMT's picked Stanley up. If you can get directions, that's a plus."

The Central Artery was gridlocked, I inched along until I could take the Storrow Drive exit.

"Stanley's only visitor is his wife," Kitty told me, her hand over the phone for a second. I heard her tell the nurse on duty she was an insurance adjuster looking for time and mileage on the emergency call. "Right," she said, listening, and noting it all down on a legal pad. She disconnected with a thank you.

Traffic along the river was moving faster. I could pick up Route 2 in Cambridge.

"Pepperell," Kitty said. "That's where Stanley was picked up. Volunteer fire department, ambulance on call. I've already got the number; you want me to give it a shot?"

I should have known Stanley wasn't just joyriding. He'd been on his way to see the beekeeper. "Try my brother first," I said. I gave her Tony's number.

She started to explain who she was when he answered; I interrupted impatiently. "Ask him how the hell we're going to find Creek Fortier," I said. "Tell him I screwed up, and we're behind the clock."

"He heard you," Kitty told me, listening to Tony. Then she laughed. "You got that right," she said, into the phone.

We were past the Magazine Street railroad trestle, closing on Soldiers Field Road and the Eliot Bridge. I was shifting back and forth between lanes, picking every gap I could, leaving some exasperated commuters behind me, giving me the finger.

"He'll have it for us," Kitty said, speaking to me with exaggerated calm as if she were talking a kitten off a ledge. "Tony wants to know how soon you think we're going to get there if we survive the ride?"

"Forty-five minutes, an hour, if we're lucky." I let my foot off the gas incrementally. "Make that an hour and a half." It was sort of an apology to Kitty for being so abrupt.

"Okay," she said to Tony and flipped the cell phone closed. "He says to be cool, Jack."

"I'm working on it," I said, but I was stirred with unease and a sense of urgency.

My brother used a livery service out of Lexington on a regular basis. They had handicapped-accessible vans, and a fleet of cabs to cover the suburban area beyond Route 128, and they bid on school bus contracts, filling in between assigned stops. If you were too far off the beaten track or had a special-needs child who wasn't

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being mainstreamed, Tony's taxi guys would carpool you, mileage paid by the state. Their dispatchers knew every secondary road in Middlesex County including this poverty pocket outside the 495 loop. Tony was passing us directions.

"Stanley's been helping Creek Fortier out ever since Vietnam," I explained to Kitty. "He's lent him money he never expected to be paid back, given him tools, kept him afloat. I don't mean Fortier's a *user,* but Stanley was a soft touch because Creek was a link to his dead son, something Stanley wouldn't want to let go of. My guess is that Stanley cosigned a mortgage for this property Creek's got, and when Creek didn't keep up the payments, Stanley took title or something like that. Creek's on the dim side, I hear. Or not of this world, anyway, which Stanley wouldn't take as a handicap. And he wouldn't want to see Creek lose the place. He must have told Andy to make sure the land got transferred to Creek's name, but he didn't tell Andy the punchline, which is that he was dying. Andy got curious."

I glanced over at her. "I guess that's an occupational hazard. Besides, you don't want to see your grandfather make foolish moves when he's getting along in years. That's why Chip McGill put the heat under Stanley. He thought Andy was trying to roust him because, like any paranoid, he made it for a conspiracy."

"When all it is is miscommunication," Kitty suggested.

"All it is is Stanley trying to protect this guy."

"From the rigors of the modern age," she said.

"Yeah, well, my guess is that Creek Fortier has been lured into the modern age in a big way," I said. "I think it's the biker connection. Creek builds custom bikes. So long as people leave him alone to raise bees and build bikes, he's got no kick with the twenty-first century. Stanley insulated him, but with Stanley gone he'd be on his own. If he didn't think about it, somebody might have suggested it to him."

She was ahead of me. "Chip McGill," she said.

I stood on the gas to get around a pickup loaded with drywall. Kitty dug her feet into the floorboards as we swerved back into our own lane. "Creek was in the biker loop," I told her. "I don't mean he's a card-carrying member of an outlaw club, but gear-heads know about each other. It's word of mouth. So a Disciple comes by to talk bikes, and they hit it off. The guy sees an opportunity. Here's a reclusive motorcycle freak living out in the sticks, no near neighbors. Kind of a Luddite even, except when it comes to tuning bike engines."

"Which is what? Basically his only real social skill?"

"Exactly. And the Disciples persuade him his interests lie in diversification, expanding his horizons."

"Including?"

"Better living through chemistry," I said.

Her cell phone beeped. It was Tony. I'd slowed down coming into Groton. Kitty, the phone to her ear, pointed me up a back road north

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that led along the Nashua River, a tributary of the Merrimack. The narrow blacktop followed the contours of the hillsides that supplied the watershed and crossed the river on a covered bridge, coming into the foot of the village.

Pepperell is another one of those settlements that time forgot after the mills closed. It was as if the waters of a great flood had lapped at its doorstep and then left it high and dry. It was a dry town, literally. You couldn't buy liquor there.

"Got it," Kitty said into the phone. She glanced at me. "We go through town past the elementary school and take a right-hand fork at the Congregational Church," she said.

I followed her instructions.

"Bald Hill Road," Kitty said. "Okay." She turned in her seat. "He's starting to break up," she told me. "We're getting out of range."

Cell coverage overlapped, but we were in a blind spot.

"I'm losing you," Kitty said to Tony. "Say again." She listened, had him repeat it a third time, and then broke the connection. "We look for a side road up here on the left," she said to me. "Unpaved but graded. There should be horse barns and a riding ring maybe half a mile in. A mile or so past that, there'll be a split-rail fence and a dirt driveway and kind of a shed. I didn't quite get that, but it's the best I could do."

We took the turn we thought we were supposed to, and half a mile in we passed the horse barns. There was nobody there. After a mile point two by the odometer there was a little lean-to up against a split-rail fence. Inside the lean-to was a shelf with jars of honey for sale and a coffee can where you left the money on the honor system. The property was heavily wooded, and we couldn't see a house from the road. I drove past slowly and pulled up a hundred yards farther along.

"You thinking to go in on foot?" Kitty asked me.

"That's the plan," I said.

"And this is where you tell me to wait here, right? With a cell phone that doesn't work and no idea what's going on."

I'd already had second thoughts about bringing Kitty along, but she was right. "You weird with guns?" I asked her.

"No more than the next girl."

I took out the Smith, checked the magazine, and tucked it away in the small of my back. I reached under the seat and got the compact nine out of its spring clip. I worked the slide, safed it, and held it out to Kitty. "Point it, snap the safety off, squeeze the trigger," I said, showing her what I was talking about. "Don't use it unless they get close and you can hit them square in the upper body, no chance of a miss."

She nodded and took the gun. "Combat nine millimeter, double-action-only, pre-Brady double-stack, thirteen rounds. I've got a concealed carry permit, Jack," she said. "My mistake, I left my own gun in my other pants."

I was going to remark that she wasn't wearing pants, she had on a navy jacket and a skirt that showed off her legs, but I figured I'd embarrassed myself enough already.

She tucked the nine in the waist-

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band of her skirt, under her jacket and behind her back, the same as I had. "What are we likely to run into?" she asked me.

"Maybe just an emotionally disabled vet," I said. "Maybe your partner come to warn him—" I held up my hand when Kitty started to protest. "Or come to explain things to him," I went on. "Or we could be about to step into the deep end of the pool, and land in the heavy. Are you ready for that?"

"No," she said.

I sighed. "Neither am I," I told her.

"Might as well get to it, then," Kitty said. "It won't get any easier if we wait."

We stepped out of the car into the lingering late afternoon light. The hum of insects buzzed in the grass, and birdsong sounded in the near distance. We walked back to Creek Fortier's drive and started up it. The maples had turned, their leaves scarlet and bronze, the poplars lemon yellow, the birches dusty gold. It was quiet under the trees. The leaves smelled dry and spicy.

The road opened out into a meadow, and we stopped at the edge of the trees. There was a small clapboard farmhouse, and a shop building in back. Beyond the buildings was an apple orchard, untended but with beehives spaced between the trees, square boxes up on platforms, the orchard left for the bees, not for the apples. Fallen fruit lay on the ground, fermenting.

"Do bees hibernate?" Kitty asked.

"I think they go dormant in the winter, if they don't die," I said. "Maybe you have to take them in, like tomato plants or geraniums."

"You're full of vegetable lore," she remarked, smiling.

I was looking at the open ground we had to cover. We'd be exposed to the house if anyone were watching for us. There were a couple of big bikes out back by the shop, and three cars—a GTO, vintage muscle; a '53 Ford clunker; and a new Audi. "That's his car, the Audi," Kitty said.

"Andy's?"

She nodded.

I blew out my breath, trying to think.

"Suggestion?" Kitty asked.

"Sure," I said.

"What's to keep me from simply going over there?"

"And your story's what?"

She shrugged. "I'm just some yuppie twit from Boston," she said. "A leafpeeper looking for local color."

"Andy won't give you away, you walk in on them?"

"Andy's a trial lawyer, and a good one," she said. "He can improvise."

I didn't have anything better.

"You flank the house," Kitty said, and off she went.

Flank? I thought. She sounded like a platoon sergeant. I let her get out in the open where she could be seen and worked my way around the meadow, keeping under cover of the trees.

Kitty was halfway to the house, and then she paused for a second, leaning down to straighten her heel or pick a stone out of her shoe. She didn't look in my direction.

I froze where I was, wondering if she were trying to send me a signal,

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but I didn't see that anything had changed. The place was completely still except for a few late-season cicadas sawing in the tall grass, and the air felt hot and somnolent.

Kitty went on up the drive, approaching the house without any obvious apprehension, like somebody who'd run out of gas and needed to use the phone.

I'd stopped circling, watching her.

She went up onto the small porch and peered in the windows, and then she went around back toward the shop.

I waited to see if something happened, but nothing did.

Kitty came back out front and made a shrugging gesture, her hands out at her sides. I hobbled across the grass, favoring my bad leg. "Nobody home, tiddley-pum," she said.

The sun was just below the treeline, the light taking on a metallic quality, sharp and coppery. A slight breeze lifted the leaves of the maples. There was the scent of water, a stream or a spring nearby, and something else, not acrid but steely, like a whiff of ammonia.

"What *is* that?" Kitty asked, sniffing the wind. "It smells like nail polish remover."

"Acetone," I said. It was very faint, though. From what Frank Dugan had told me about cooking meth, I'd expected more of a piercing odor.

"They're here, then," she said.

Did she still think Andy was an innocent bystander in this?

I didn't ask her out loud.

We went through the orchard, moving carefully.

"Are bees territorial?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "Social insects, mated to their hives. They kill intruders, but beekeepers work around them all the time and don't get stung."

I wished I knew what I was talking about. The bees were everywhere under the apple trees, but they seemed sleepy, headed home with dusk. You could brush them aside gently, and they'd go on about their business. We were no more than objects in the way, and they went around. There was nothing angry about them.

"Jack," Kitty said, stopping short.

A few trees off the path a bunch of bees were swarming, confused and without any apparent purpose, rising in a cloud and then settling again, like moths. It was uncharacteristic.

I ducked under the branches and went closer. The bees were agitated and uncertain. I didn't want them any more worked up.

He lay his length on the ground, staring at the sky. I hadn't seen him in over twenty years, but I knew it was Creek Fortier. The bees kept lighting on him, almost plucking at his hair, his clothes. I'd never seen anything like it. I couldn't credit them with a dog's intelligence or loyalty, but there it was. They seemed to be trying to coax him up. With the back of his head blown off, I didn't think he'd rise to the occasion.

I backed away. "We got big trouble," I murmured to Kitty.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"It's not Andy, it's Creek," I told her.

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She looked relieved.

"We should go to the car, and to town, and get some backup," I said.

"Not if Andy's down there," she said.

"We're in over our heads," I said.

"You, maybe," Kitty said, turning away.

Below the orchard the ground sloped off to a brook overhung with poplar and birch. We moved into a stand of trees to our left and worked our way down to the water. From there we made our way downstream, using what cover we could, and found what we were looking for.

"Like a moonshiner's," Kitty whispered to me.

It was a small shed built on a platform over the brook with outside ductwork to a hood on the roof and a tangle of copper piping that went under the surface of the water. It was a distillery, in effect, to condense and filter the residue, disguising the smell. Creek's work, I figured.

"A peculiar genius," Kitty remarked.

I nodded. "But why did they kill him?" I asked.

"They're closing down," she said.

Which made sense if the operation were compromised, but how sure of that were they?

We made our approach to the shed incrementally, move and then crouch, move and crouch, trying to make as little noise as possible. The running water chuckled in the streambed loudly enough that we weren't heard. When we got next to the little outbuilding, we hunkered down outside the windowless plywood sheathing. Nobody had raised an alarm.

Whoever was inside wasn't listening for trespassers. They were too intent on something else. There was an indistinct murmur of voices and then an involuntary whimper and ragged, heavy breathing. What it sounded like was an interrogation, and a painful one.

Kitty and I probably had the same thought at the same time: Andy was being tortured.

We ducked around the corner of the shed and took up our positions on either side of the plank door, both of us with guns up, cocked and locked, fingers alongside the trigger guards. There was another sharp whimper of pain.

I nodded to Kitty, stepped back, and kicked the door open. We were inside before anybody had time to react.

Everything stopped for maybe a long three count, all of us taken by surprise.

Three guys, one tied in a chair. The guy in the chair was battered and bruised, but it wasn't Andy. It was the redheaded biker from Charlestown. Andy was standing behind him with a pair of bloody pliers in his hand. The third guy was in front of the chair, caught in a half crouch, looking over his shoulder at us. I knew he was Chip McGill.

Sometimes things slow down, like it's happening underwater, but this was sudden and abrupt. McGill snapped out of his crouch, coming up with a stainless autoloader in his right hand. It was incredibly stupid of him, and he made the

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same mistake I'd made in back of the Blue Mirror, not watching the girl. Kitty shot him twice in the chest with the nine, punching two holes in him you could have covered with a quarter. He was dead when he hit the floor.

Andy jumped back, and Kitty shifted her aim. I thought for a second she was going to shoot Andy, too.

"Oh God, Kitty," Andy bleated, dropping the pliers. "Look what he made me do."

Kitty wasn't having any. "Shut up," she said tiredly. "Don't give me any more reason to hate your guts." But at least she lowered the gun.

They'd wired Red's wrists together behind his back, and I had to use the pliers to get it off. I tried not to think about what else they'd been used for. "DEA," he croaked, rubbing his hands together to bring back the circulation. "Working undercover with the state police."

Well, at least he'd gotten my gun away from the speed freak before she killed me with it, I remembered.

We started back up toward the house. Red needed my help, which I didn't wonder at. He was in bad shape. Kitty seemed to have gone numb, too, which I didn't wonder at, either. It was a delayed reaction from shooting McGill. You don't shake it off that easily.

We were still below the orchard when Andy took it into his head to make a run for it. He just suddenly bolted, pumping his legs through the tall grass, plowing uphill. None of us had the energy to chase him, and there wasn't much point in shooting him. How far was he going to get, after all? Maybe he thought he could outrun his disgrace, his life in a shambles.

"Andy," Kitty called after him wearily.

But he didn't look back. He charged recklessly through the orchard, flailing at the aroused bees.

"Oh Jesus," Kitty whispered.

I didn't quite get what was happening. I saw Andy stumble and find his feet and then stumble again and go down.

Kitty had stopped where she stood, stricken.

Andy managed to stand again, his angry shouts turning into a terrified wail. The air around him was thick with insects, and bees had settled on him like a carpet, so many they obscured his shape. He fell a last time and didn't get up.

The clamor of bees subsided in the gathering twilight, and the light breeze rustled through the maples.

We made a wide circle around the orchard, not speaking. If any of us had thoughts, we kept them to ourselves.

Stanley died two days later. He'd gone into a coma and hadn't come out of it. Maybe it was for the best, since he didn't have to learn about his grandson.

Andy had cut himself in on McGill's racket early when Creek Fortier had come to ask his advice, not daring to bring it up with Stanley. I'd guessed right about that part at least.

Stanley had held the paper on

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Creek's land, intending to put it in trust with Andy as trustee. The part I'd guessed wrong about was why Chip McGill had gone after Stanley. It was insurance, plain and simple, in case Andy got cold feet. McGill thought like a thug, which he was. What nobody figured out until afterwards was that Andy had already decided he'd throw McGill over the side. If the Disciples thought McGill were a liability, they'd take him out for their own protection. Andy just needed a credible story, one that would sell on the street, and he had it in the case he was preparing, the townies who had bought product from McGill. If word got out they were going to plead down in exchange for giving him up, he was dead meat. His big name in the neighborhoods wouldn't buy him a pass.

Why had Andy gone bad? Maybe somebody had finally met his price, but that doesn't really explain it. Kitty Dwyer believed in him right up until she saw him with the pliers in his hand.

And that's where my own thinking led me. Andy had gotten tired of living up to other people's expectations. He stepped over the line because the line was there. They say in the trade that the dealer always gives you the first taste for free.

Then there was Max Quinn.

I knew that Kitty had terminated his contract with Ravenant & Dwyer, and by an unhappy coincidence I met him a couple of days later, lugging his files out of the office. I was there to take Kitty to lunch.

Max put the box he was carrying down on the tailgate of a station wagon parked in the loading zone and looked me over with bland venom. "You queered me good, pal," he said, smiling.

The smile was for show. "Not my intention," I said.

"Well, the good Lord save us from honest intentions," Max said. He leaned back and rested his elbows on the carton. "You ever stop to think I had those vermin in the palm of my hand and I was ready to close my fist? I coulda had every one of the bastards, and what do *you* have to show for it? Chip McGill on a slab and a dead lawyer." He shrugged. " 'Course, I guess a dead lawyer ain't the worst thing. You take the bitter with the sweet." He smiled that crocodile smile again.

"I'm not arguing," I said. "But our interests weren't the same. You were looking for it to go your way. My client wanted a different outcome."

He snorted. "Your *client,*" he said. "Jesus, you take the prize. Your client is *dead,* for Christ's sake. He had one foot in the grave when he hired you. You should of showed me some professional courtesy, for openers. Not to mention that I saved your ass from a whipping."

"I wasn't forgetting," I said.

"Me, either," Max said.

"You had a personal axe to grind," I told him, "and you were looking to buy chips so you could get back in the game."

"Is *that* what you think?" Max shook his head. "You stupid s.o.b."

"Don't push it," I said.

"I have an axe to grind, yeah," he

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said hoarsely. "You want to know what it is? My daughter Olivia died on speed. She took a hotshot. And those bikers are out there peddling methedrine cut with rat poison. You'd *better* goddamn know I've got an axe to grind."

"You were on the task force, state police and DEA," I said, finally seeing the forest for the trees.

"Now we're playing catchup ball."

There was nothing I could say. I tried anyway. "I'm sorry about your daughter," I said.

"Sorry don't do the trick, pal," he said, and turned away.

I remembered what Stanley had said about flying over the Adriatic during bombing runs. It had looked so beautiful, like a blue mirror, but was hard as cement if you hit it going down. It was an appropriate metaphor.

Enemies are like that.

Max could smile his crocodile smile and pretend to carry on a civil conversation with me, like bygones were bygones, but he'd be looking for a chance to drop me in a hole, the deeper the better. It was a brute fact like the bright blue ocean below, unyielding as stone. I'd done Max an injury, and it didn't matter that it was an honest mistake. He wasn't going to give me room to make another.

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UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

Usually when the ringing of the phone wakes me up my disposition would make a grizzly seem like a teddy bear. On that particular Sunday morning, however, my mood took a definite upswing when the caller identified himself as Thomas Siegel, owner of the Sea Gull Hotel. He had hired my P.I. agency several times in the past. Paid well, too.

"Mr. Hawkes," he said, "sorry to disturb you, but this is an emergency. One of my employees has been killed in my casino, and I know you can be discreet—"

"I'll be there in half an hour, sir," I interrupted.

The traffic here in Miami is always light on Sunday mornings, and I arrived at the Sea Gull in twenty minutes. Siegel himself was pacing the lobby, his shoulders uncharacteristically drooping.

"Thank heaven I got hold of you!" he exclaimed. "The body is lying in my Lavender Angel Casino. That's on the second floor."

We took the elevator. Before unlocking the casino door, Siegel said, "Perhaps I'd better explain a few things first, Mr. Hawkes. My casino operation is handled by seven men—the cashier, the blackjack dealer, the croupier, the credit comptroller, the bouncer, the manager, and the auditor. Their first names are Alvin, Bart, Chuck, Danny, Eddie, Frank, and George, and their last names are Osmund, Palmer, Quirk, Ruskin, Staley, Turner, and Ulmer. Their wives—Helen, Irene, Jenny, Kitty, Lorna, Molly, and Nancy—are waitresses in the dining room and cocktail bar and don't have casino keys."

"Were they here in the hotel at the time of the murder?"

"I'm not certain. I furnish each couple with an apartment. They are on floors three through eleven, although none is on floors five or nine. I should also mention that the men take turns—one each morning of the week—checking that the casino is ready for business starting in the afternoon."

"Who was killed?"

For answer, Mr. Siegel unlocked the door and pointed to the roulette table. Sprawled across it was a man with an icepick between his shoulder blades. Yes, it was definitely murder.

"Who's he?" I asked.

"He's the employee who was supposed to check the casino this

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morning. I just happened to pass the door and thought I'd see if he'd been around yet. I didn't move the body—it didn't seem necessary under the circumstances."

"Police?"

"I haven't notified them yet. As you can understand, I'd like to avoid undue publicity. Unfortunately, the murderer had to be another of my employees who had a key to the casino. If you could determine which one is guilty, it would save time with the police, who wouldn't be alarming the guests by swarming all over the hotel."

"All the casino employees are present now?" I inquired.

"Yes. I assembled them in my office."

"Let's see what they have to say."

(1) Danny declared, "My apartment is two floors below that of Helen's husband and two floors above Mr. Quirk. We three check the casino on Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays. None of us could possibly have killed him. A high roller from New York had an exceptional streak of luck last night and invited us three and our wives to spend the night celebrating with him aboard his yacht."

(2) Bart said, "My turn to check the casino comes later in the week than the credit comptroller's, whose turn is after Alvin's."

(3) The man whose turn came on Wednesday stated, "I'm not guilty; last night my wife had an emergency appendectomy, and I spent the night at the hospital. Ask the doctors—I just returned. Alvin, the croupier, and I occupy apartments on odd-numbered floors."

(4) Frank said, "I'm not the croupier. My apartment is on the floor just above the blackjack dealer, whose apartment is higher than that of the victim (who is not Mr. Turner)."

(5) Mr. Staley spoke up. "During the week my turn to check the casino is the day after the auditor's and the day before George's."

(6) Mr. Palmer said, "My apartment is two floors above Molly's husband and four floors above the casino bouncer (whose turn to check the casino comes later in the week than that of Molly's husband)."

(7) Mr. Osmund stated, "My wife and I went fishing early this morning with five guests of the hotel. We all got back only a few minutes ago. My turn to check the casino is two days earlier in the week than that of Lorna's husband. My apartment is two floors below Lorna's husband and four floors below the cashier."

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(8) Kitty's husband declared, "My turn to check is later in the week than the manager's and before that of the man on the third floor (who isn't Chuck)."

(9) Mr. Ruskin said, "My turn to check everything is the morning just after the man on the seventh floor and just before Jenny's husband."

(10) Eddie said, "My apartment is somewhere below Mr. Ulmer and somewhere above Nancy's husband."

After reviewing my notes, I reported to Mr. Siegel. "All I can say for certain is that one of your casino employees lacks an alibi. I suggest you call the police now and tell them that."

My deduction was right. The killer then pleaded self-defense, but the jury doubted his story for two reasons: he was carrying an icepick, and he "defended himself" by stabbing his attacker in the back.

Who stabbed whom in the casino early that Sunday morning?

See page 139 for the solution to the November puzzle.

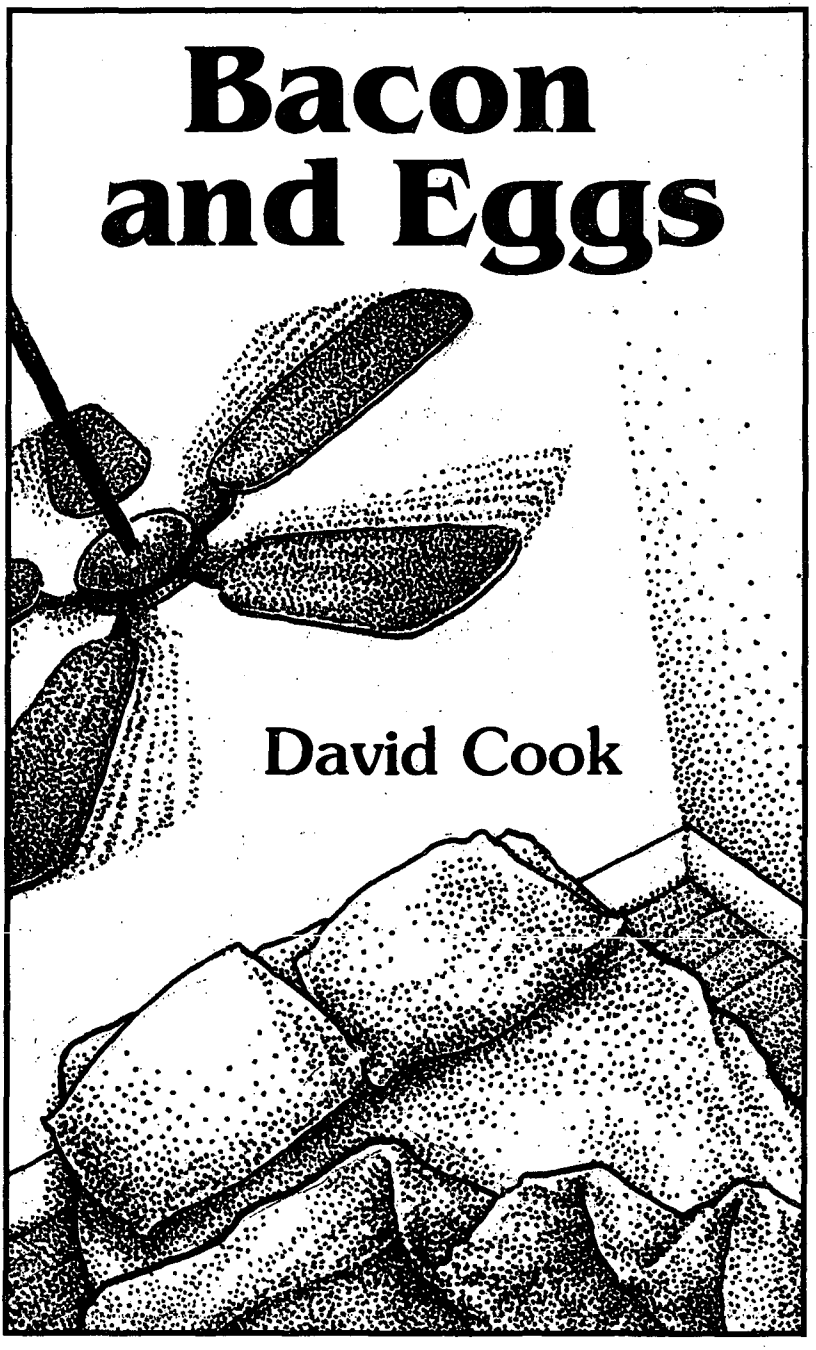
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FICTION

Bacon and Eggs



David Cook

Illustration by M. Bilokur

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Dick Humboldt didn't remember the noise that woke him. He lay on his back next to the edge of their double bed. He was smiling, half awake, half lost in a recurring dream, the one in which his wife Jane rested her body against his side and pulled her lips away from his to leave him wanting more. He could taste her, smell her, feel the warmth of her breath against his cheek. Her face was so close that all he could see was her smile, not her ample breasts tugging her thin shoulders. Not the butcher knife in her hand.

Had he been awakened a minute later, he would have been screaming, his pleasant dream having slipped into a nightmare, but now he was content to be held within the limits of a single, insulated image. He loved this silent, smiling woman who had shared his embrace, his life.

Loved her and feared her.

He reached over to the side of the bed that was still hers. She wasn't there. His contentment slipped into sadness.

His eyes slowly opened. Maybe he saw it out of the corner of his eye, but he wasn't yet conscious of the suggested threat. Instead, the ceiling fan caught his attention. Vaguely anxious, he followed the tip of a single vane and felt the air tickling his skin.

No, he didn't exactly see it yet, and he couldn't remember what woke him, but he knew something was wrong.

He could feel the stiffness of the new mattress. The old one had been soaked with his blood. The tissue beneath the scar in his chest ached. As he often did, he wondered what would happen if she slipped away from the psychiatric hospital to return and punish him. Would she hide in one of the closets of their unfinished, mazelike home? Or would she pause beyond the stone walls, waiting for him behind the unused cement blocks or behind the poplar trees that lined the edges of the long gravel driveway? Together they had begun building their dream house well away from the lonely blacktop road, close to their private lake. She had not wanted to be disturbed by the world outside. Dick now understood that his wife's own world had been disturbed enough.

In the moment before the attack, all he had been aware of was the tousled blonde hair on her forehead, her distant smile, and her green eyes, the pupils of which seemed to swell open into blackness. Throughout their seven years of marriage he had been careful not to wonder about what was hidden in that blackness, content to eat her food by day and love her by night.

He continued to watch the tip of the rotating fan blade slicing the air above him. Around and around. The dizzy motion seemed to increase his awareness that something was wrong. He pulled his eyes away and looked at the single, unhung lithograph leaning against the wall. The picture was her favorite, a medieval street scene. He had bought it for her at an art festival. The hodgepodge of houses in the scene were all tiny, like the six bedrooms of Dick and Jane's house. She had demanded he

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build tiny rooms with lots of doors and closets, lots of hallways: a labyrinth that even now defied his memory and left him feeling disoriented.

"Planning a large family, are we?" he had asked, looking forward to more of the sex that, along with the building of the house, their house, he'd mistaken for intimacy.

"No," she had said. "It's just something I can't explain. Large rooms, they bother me. I like tiny places where you can hide, where they can't find you."

They?

He hadn't asked. It had been an unspoken agreement; her thoughts had been her own, like the contents of her private closet, the door of which had remained tightly shut since they had locked her away.

"Small rooms will be perfect," he'd said. "Just don't hide from me."

Anything to please her, anything to keep her pleasing him. Despite her growing silence, he had assumed they were communicating well. Her arms about him, her lips, her tongue, the press of her fingers and body: her touch alone had seemed to tell him everything he needed to know. And hadn't their communication extended beyond the bedroom?

Yes, at the time her cooking had seemed full of intimacy, full of spice, just like their marriage bed. He'd loved the way she'd nursed her chile for hours, simmering the spices before serving it to him in hollowed out loaves of home-baked bread. Sure, some of her creative dinners had been inedible disasters, but her breakfasts, full of intimacy, had never wavered from perfection. Each morning she had lovingly presented his food as if she were offering him her very soul. Sometimes she had served him breakfast on fine china, sometimes on those red plastic picnic plates, but every morning it had been the same meal—bacon and eggs, seasoned with a sprinkle of fresh ground pepper and the faintest hint of cayenne.

Those breakfasts had been to die for!

How little he had understood. Now he knew that there had been more to her than building a house, more than making love half the night long, more than bacon and eggs.

He looked about the barren bedroom; its primed but unpainted walls were the color of fog. His eyes began to dart between three closed doors: one narrow, opening on her closet; two wider, opening on bathroom and hall.

Closed doors?

He suddenly became aware of what, out of the corner of his eye, had begun the anxiety that was even now continuing to build: her closet door was ever-so-slightly ajar.

How could that be?

He knew she was locked up halfway across the state. But today she seemed closer. Today he could almost feel her.

Why was her presence so strong?

Again he looked at her unfinished closet door: solid oak, no doorknob,

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just a round black hole rounder and blacker than her pupils. Was she in there watching him? His thoughts returned to the extraordinary blackness of her pupils, and a sense of guilt joined his anxiety. He felt that, somehow, he had deserted her.

He had tried to visit her only once, but they wouldn't let him.

They?

The hospital administrators, Dr. Stendal actually. He said, "Peculiar. I haven't heard of any Jane Humboldt. Hmm. We divide the patients and there are so many these days, but it seems I would have . . . ask Dr. Fitzgerald. Yes, ask him. What do you want with her?"

The question had caught Dick off guard, half startled him. He had stared at the doctor and found Stendal's pupils almost as large and black as Jane's, odd for a wrinkled man going senile in his early sixties. Dick had been afraid to look into the man's eyes, just as now he was afraid to look through the vacant hole in the slightly open closet door. No telling what might be hiding within.

Dick had started to look for Dr. Fitzgerald but then changed his mind. He knew it was irrational, but for some reason he'd been afraid to hear what Fitzgerald might ask, afraid the doctor might probe into Dick's unconscious and blame him for Jane's condition. Instead, Dick had returned home to wander about the unfinished house that she had insisted they move into two weeks before the attack. Had moving in been part of some premeditated scheme, or had the change of residence just triggered something, caused something to snap? As he'd run his fingertips over surfaces smoothed by her sanding, he'd yearned to visit her, but he couldn't. No, he just couldn't bear to confront Dr. Fitzgerald and the possibility of his probing, painful questions.

Now he stared at Jane's closet door, slightly ajar, and felt his growing anxiety turning into alarm. What if Jane had escaped to punish him for not visiting her? Surely Dr. Fitzgerald would have called to warn him? But no, Dick hadn't met Dr. Fitzgerald, had he? And Dr. Stendal, what were the chances he'd notice if she escaped?

A beautiful woman could hitchhike any distance, even halfway across the state.

A beautiful woman with a butcher knife.

Dick broke out in a cold sweat. He considered lowering himself from the bed, but suddenly he pictured her hiding beneath the box spring, the blade of her knife poised and ready to slash through both of his Achilles tendons. In his mind he saw his calf muscles knotting up, saw himself lying helpless on the unvarnished hardwood floor. She would crawl from beneath the bed, her face smiling, the butcher knife raised in the air just as it had been that evening . . .

Where had she hid the knife while they had made love?

He snatched up the unwrinkled pillow that he used to reserve her side of the bed.

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There was no knife.

Of course not. He was acting crazy. Even so, when he jumped down from the bed, he was careful to land several feet away, just in case.

As soon as his feet hit the floor, he was down on his hands and knees, looking under the box spring.

Nothing there but a lost sock cradled in dust. He looked back at the closet door, ajar but unmoving. He tried to laugh at himself, but the tightening in his chest wouldn't go away.

He stood up and realized his bladder was nearly bursting. This was ridiculous. She couldn't be here. He wouldn't let himself lose it this way. He tried to stop his body from shaking, but he couldn't. Enough of this foolishness! He'd use the bathroom. But what if she were hiding in the closet, just waiting for his stream to start before she sneaked up and made her cut? He was not a tall man, no taller than she had been; his urine, splashing in the toilet, would give away his position. But this was crazy! She was confined, locked away. He was acting nuts. If this kept up, they would lock him away with her in a padded cell.

They?

He walked naked across the room. The soles of his feet felt the slightest trace of plaster dust on the hardwood floor. He threw open the bathroom door and headed for the toilet but then became aware of the bathtub. The shower curtain was drawn.

Had he drawn it shut? He didn't think so.

As he wondered, he became aware of a darker form swaying behind the translucent curtain. He gasped. The skin over his face squeezed tight; his heart began to pound. He wanted to bolt out of the bathroom but couldn't. He was frozen in place, unable to move. The prickle of gooseflesh burned his arms. Helplessly he waited for her to throw the shower curtain open, to plunge the blade into his heart.

Maybe he even deserved it for deserting her, never visiting her.

"Please!" he half moaned, half whispered. "Please don't!"

There was no response, no movement, no sound but his gasping for breath as if he were drowning and his face had surfaced for the last time.

"Jane, no!" he cried. "I'm sorry!"

The intensity of his own words jolted him into action. He half leaped, half fell forward, seizing the shower curtain. He pulled so hard that the plastic curtain rings began snapping and flying all over the room, clattering against the sink, the walls, the mirror. As he jerked the curtain down, he saw her pink bathrobe coming at him, inches from his face. He began to scream, dropped the curtain and reached forward to protect himself. He clenched the terry cloth in his hands. It seemed to draw him back into the present, into sanity.

The robe was just hanging there from the portable clothesline.

Trembling, embarrassed, he sat down hard on the edge of the tub. He could hear his breath rasping as he struggled to pull air into his lungs.

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Why was he acting this way? He rested his face in the palms of his hands and began to weep. Was he going crazy like her?

But then he looked back up at the robe, and a question occurred to him: why was her robe hanging in the shower? And why had her closet door been cracked open? Last night before he'd gone to bed, hoping to dream things back the way they used to be, had he walked to her closet and moved her robe into the shower? Of course not. Why would he?

His fear began to grow again. He had to do something. He stood up, found a towel, and wrapped it around him. Then he left the bathroom, walked to her closet, and stood there staring at the door, his heart pounding, his flesh crawling. He reached forward to extend his finger through the doorknob hole and pull the door open, but then he imagined the knife slicing off the end of his finger. He jerked his hand back and stood there staring, wondering if he should run. But where would he run to? What if she were waiting for him outside the bedroom door?

He thrust his finger through the doorknob hole and threw the door open, hard. He imagined the knife coming toward his chest out of the dark interior of the closet. His body jerked, and a short scream burst from his lips before he could stop it. Other than the empty space on the rod where her robe had once hung, everything was as it should be. She wasn't inside the closet.

He walked over to the bedroom door and paused. He imagined pulling the door open and her standing there with the knife raised, ready to slash his throat. He tried to reach out and throw the door open, but his hand moved as if in slow motion. He watched his fingers traveling through space, closing on the doorknob. He felt the coolness of the metal as he turned the knob and the door slowly opened in front of him. And then he just stood there, his heart racing, his skin crawling, as he gasped and smelled it, his nostrils flaring.

Was he going crazy? No, this was really happening.

He heard the sound coming from the direction of the kitchen, echoing along the winding hall. The sizzling.

He inhaled again, this time through his nose, and he could feel the hairs on his head standing on end. The aroma was unmistakable.

Bacon and eggs. Cayenne pepper.

To die for.

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WELCOMING THE PADDY GOD

I. J. Parker



Illustration by Linda Weatherly

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HEIAN-KYO (KYOTO), ELEVENTH CENTURY JAPAN, THE EVER-GROWING MONTH (APRIL).

The two gentlemen met by accident crossing Nijo Avenue on a sunny morning of the third month of the year. They bowed, eyeing each other cautiously. "Kobe?" murmured the tall thin man in costly court attire and with a touch of grey at the temples. "What a pleasure. I hope you are in good health?"

"Thank you, Excellency. And you and your family also, I hope?"

Polite preliminaries allowed them to test the waters before flinging themselves into the dangerous currents of discussing crime. The thin nobleman, Sugawara Akitada, had risen from obscurity in the Ministry of Justice to high office in the imperial administration because he had a knack for solving difficult criminal cases and smoothing out politically explosive incidents, while Superintendent Kobe of the Metropolitan Police had moved up by patient and stubborn plodding. Their paths had often crossed, usually to their mutual frustration, though occasionally they had surprised each other into cooperation.

Friendly relations established, Akitada asked, "Any interesting cases?"

Kobe hesitated only briefly. "One. A monk in the Western Prison. A particularly repulsive crime, robbery and murder. This Ennin has confessed, but the evidence has disappeared into thin air."

Akitada raised his brows. "If he confessed, surely your job is done."

"Yes, but . . ." Kobe fidgeted, looking uncomfortable. "You know I like things neat. It's not just that we cannot account for the silver. Something else is not quite right. Something about that confession or the man himself."

Akitada was thoroughly intrigued by now.

"Do you suspect there was an accomplice? What does the prisoner say?"

Kobe threw up his hands in disgust. "Just that he's guilty. No details. He doesn't know what happened to the evidence." Pause. "Would you have time to talk to the man? I would like your opinion."

That was a surprise. And time hung heavy on Akitada's hands at the moment. He was between assignments and bored with the enforced leisure. "Well . . ." he said dubiously.

"I was just on my way to the prison," Kobe urged. "Would you care to come along?"

Akitada nodded.

The capital had an eastern and western half, each with its own administrative system. The western half had begun to decline a century earlier until large parts of it were inhabited mostly by the poor, outcasts, and criminal gangs. Being jailed in the Western Prison meant that the prisoner and his crime were of the lowest type. Most men in Kobe's position would have washed their hands of a confessed killer of no standing, glad to rid the capital of one of its vermin. But Kobe had always had a conscience.

"Tell me about the case," Akitada said as they walked along Nijo un-

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der the pale new leaves of the willows in front of the Imperial Palace.

The crime, or crimes, it appeared, took place in Higa, a village near the capital. A farmer returned late one night from a trip to the capital and found both his daughter and his money box gone. He shouted for his daughter and searched the property for his silver. Finally a noise alerted him to an abandoned well; a large bloodied monk was climbing out of it. Confronted, the monk seemed shaken and claimed to have fallen into the well. After he left, the farmer inspected the well and discovered at its bottom his young daughter's corpse. She lay there, her clothes disarranged and covered with blood. Next to her was the empty money box. The horrified farmer called for his neighbors. Together they brought up the dead girl, whose neck was bruised and broken. It looked as if she had been raped and then killed. The constables found the monk down by the river washing the blood off himself. Although he was a very large man, they overcame him and threw him in a cell.

"Hmm," said Akitada. "It wouldn't be the first time a monk forgot his vows. Theirs is an unnatural life. The crime sounds straightforward enough."

Kobe scowled. "Oh, he confessed to all charges, even rape, but wait till you hear."

The prisoner was the most repulsive creature Akitada had ever seen. A huge man, he squatted toadlike on some stinking straw in the corner of the cell, shackled at the ankles and wrists. He looked perfectly capable of the most heinous crimes. His fleshy face was swollen and a sickly yellow color where it was not covered with purple bruises and brown scabs; his body seemed bloated rather than fat, and he was dressed in filthy rags. When they entered, he raised bulging, bloodshot eyes to them. His thick lower lip drooped dejectedly, letting a thin line of saliva seep down his stubble-covered chin. He looked like a dangerous halfwit, Akitada thought, and he wondered if Kobe's trouble was that his prisoner was mentally deficient. The government was reluctant to countersign execution orders for such people.

But the monk disabused him of this notion immediately. "Good day to you, superintendent," he greeted Kobe, his voice hoarse but educated. "Please forgive my rudeness, but it is difficult to bow. I seem to be unable to move very much, and I'm afraid I can't invite you to sit on this floor."

"Never mind that, Ennin," Kobe said. "This noble lord would like you to tell him your story."

The ugly creature rolled its eyes to Akitada and nodded a greeting. "If you wish, but there's little to tell," he said apologetically.

Missing teeth, a split lip, and assorted scabs and bruises suggested that he had been beaten severely. His dirty rags were actually a very old, stained, and faded monk's robe which had been black, and the stubble-covered skull had once been shaven.

Even to someone with Akitada's

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cynical views on Buddhism, it seemed extraordinary that this monk should be accused of such a collection of crimes. With a single crime he had broken the monastic vows of poverty, of celibacy, and of nonviolence. The man must be an animal.

The bloodshot eyes studied Akitada also, and the monk smiled. The smile lit up the grotesque features and suddenly superimposed an emotion so incongruously human that Akitada drew in his breath.

"You see," the monk said, "I don't remember what I did—precisely—though of course I can see now that I must have done it. I am quite horrified. She was such a pretty young girl, and so kind. I do not remember touching her, but I could see that I had." To Akitada's astonishment, the man blushed and lowered his eyes. "She was partly . . . nude, and there was blood. Though perhaps that was mine. I seem to have cut my head. But what was much worse, I must have strangled her afterwards. I suppose she fought me, but I have very strong hands."

He held them out for Akitada to see: huge, dirty paws with long, broken fingernails.

"There was quite a lot of blood on my hands and robe when I woke. The farmer said I robbed him of some silver, but I do not remember that either, though I must have done it, for his money box was right there in the well beside me." He paused, waiting for Akitada to comment.

Akitada had listened in astonishment. "What were you doing at the farm? Did you know the farmer and his daughter?"

The monk averted his eyes again. "Not to say 'know.' I had spoken to them when I stopped for alms. The young woman was always very kind and generous, but her father's a tightwad. He caught her giving me food and was so angry he tried to beat her with a broom. I stopped him, but he called me names. I'm afraid I shouted also. It was not pleasant."

"What is wrong with your memory?" Akitada asked.

The monk hung his head. "It's the wine," he confessed. "I'm not supposed to drink, but I'm weak. Sometimes people give me a few coins instead of food and I buy wine."

"Yes," put in Kobe impatiently, "he was still half drunk when they brought him in. Stank of wine, in fact. No doubt he celebrated on the stolen silver."

"I'm very sorry," murmured the big monk. "I cannot seem to help myself. I wish I could be more precise about what happened. It's such a dreadful thing to have done. She was kind to me and so pretty I . . ." He colored to his ears and looked down at his huge hands. "Most women don't like me," he said sadly.

Akitada and Kobe exchanged glances.

Kobe said, "So you went back later, when she was alone, to have your way with her and found she didn't like you either. That made you angry again, didn't it, and you killed her. Then you stole their silver for good measure."

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The monk nodded. "I don't remember, but yes, it must be so."

Kobe snapped, "You keep saying 'It must be so.' It *was* so, wasn't it?"

The monk raised tired eyes to him. "If you say so."

"Heavens, man," cried Kobe, "either admit it or defend yourself, or you will die."

The monk smiled sadly. "To die is easy, superintendent," he said. "The living is hard."

Later, in Kobe's office, Akitada said, "Perhaps he confessed so readily because he was beaten. The marks are still all over his body, and from the way he sat and moved, I think your men must have broken his ribs."

Kobe's temper flared. "Don't accuse me of using torture. We found him this way after the local fellows got through with him. Seems one of them had been fond of the girl."

"Oh. Sorry." Akitada sighed. "Well, perhaps he expects more of the same if he changes his story. Strange, he practically admitted lusting after her. You would expect him to deny raping her, especially when confronted by the victim's bloodthirsty boyfriend."

"Didn't I tell you? The coroner said she was not raped though someone tried to. I expect she fought him off. He had a lot of cuts and scratches on his face and scalp."

"I see. Yes, it is possible that he was too drunk to remember. When will he be brought before a judge?"

"In a day or so."

"So soon? But there is no time to do anything. He will be found guilty and executed before we've had time to cast about for additional evidence."

"I know. I suppose I had hoped you would have one of your brilliant flashes of insight."

Akitada looked for sarcasm in Kobe's words but failed to find any. "You do me too much honor, my friend," he said. "Well, let's see what we have. This Ennin had been in the habit of begging food at the farm. The pretty farmer's daughter gave it readily enough, but shortly before the murder the farmer caught her and abused her both verbally and physically. Ennin admits he got angry. Perhaps he was angry enough for revenge."

"Perhaps."

"We can assume that Ennin knew the farmer was going to the capital and would not return until late. He went back to the farm, tried to rape the girl, killed her instead, and then took the money box with enough silver to keep him in wine for the foreseeable future. Is that the way you see it?"

This time Kobe looked uncertain. "Yes, I suppose. But what did he do with the twenty pieces of silver that were in the box? The farmer caught him trying to climb out of the well. There was no silver on him when they found him by the river."

"He had time to hide it or pass it to a friend. Has it occurred to you that his claim of sudden memory loss is a little too convenient? He might be protecting someone."

"We searched everywhere and questioned everyone in the village. There was no accomplice. They know Ennin well and say he's a

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loner. He's a vagrant monk who moved into the village a month ago, sleeping in stables or storehouses at night and begging his food during the day. He doesn't have any friends or associates. He's not a likable man." Kobe paused. "That is why I want to be certain. Do you understand?"

Akitada did. He too felt guilty for his aversion to the man. "There is another possibility. He might have committed the theft earlier in the day while the girl was at work in the paddies, tossing the box into the well and hiding the silver somewhere. He then got drunk to celebrate his wealth and went back for the girl. Drunkenness would explain his having tumbled into the well with the girl and account for his sudden memory loss."

Kobe nodded slowly. "Yes. I suppose it could have happened that way. We have only his word for when he went to the farm. And he was quick enough to wash her blood off himself after the farmer saw him."

Akitada rose. "Right. That must be it, then." He added, almost regretfully, "The simplest explanation is usually the right one."

The following morning was particularly warm and pleasant. The breeze carried the scent of fresh leaves, and birds sang in all the trees. Akitada decided his horse needed exercise.

The road to Higa village was not particularly scenic, but the yellow kerria blossomed in the hedges, and bluebells nodded in the grass. Higa was in a valley where a small river provided water for rice paddies. In its center a handful of modest buildings gathered, like a flock of brown sparrows about a few grains of millet. On the hillside, among the pale springtime green of trees, rose the pagoda of a temple.

Akitada rode along the river into the village and found that a small hostel and a Shinto shrine were the principal buildings. All around, to the foot of the forested hills on either side, stretched the rice paddies like a flowered quilt, fallow now, but covered with blossoming weeds. Already farmers were busy mending dikes and turning over the rich black earth. Soon river water would be diverted into the trenches and flood the fields in time for planting the new rice.

Stopping at the hostel, Akitada tied up his horse and ducked under the lintel of the low door. It was very dark inside. The smell of fermented rice wine met his nose. An old woman greeted him with many bows and led him to a wooden platform. Not bothering to remove his riding boots, he sat on its edge and ordered some wine and pickled radish.

The old woman was a cheerful creature, small and quick, though her wrinkled skin looked like the leather of an old boot.

"Your Honor comes from the capital, no doubt?" she asked, bright black eyes scanning his plain clothes with interest as she poured his wine.

Akitada smiled. "You have sharp eyes."

This encouraged her to confide, "I

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make a sort of game out of guessing what people do, you know. Now, Your Honor came to take a look around Higa, isn't that right?" Akitada nodded. "Ah so! It's about the murder then, isn't it? Let's see! That big fool of a monk confessed, so it's not about the dead girl. It's about Katahachi's silver, right?"

She was quite good at her game. Akitada said, "I won't say yes or no. Why do you call the murderer a fool?"

She shook her head impatiently. "Because he is. I knew it the first time I saw him. He acts like a baby for all he talks like a learned fellow. Mind you, he's as ugly as a toad and people avoid him, but that's no reason to aggravate them. A monk's supposed to be modest and humble when he asks for alms. And he's supposed to say some holy things to make you feel blessed. This fellow was always reprimanding and arguing. I can't imagine how he managed to get food as long as he did. What's more, lately he's been buying wine. Which he wasn't supposed to drink in the first place, was he?"

"Do you think he was a thief?"

"Maybe. How else would he get the coppers for the wine?"

Akitada peered into his cup. The wine was thick, grainy, and dull in color. But it was sweet to the tongue, burning his throat but leaving a pleasant glow in his belly. It had been quite cheap for its quality. The monk would not have needed much of this to get drunk.

Complimenting his hostess on her wine, Akitada asked, "Do you know the farmer he robbed?"

"Katahachi? Of course. One of my best customers this time of year, even if he claims poverty every time the tax man comes."

"He has been drinking a lot?" Akitada asked in surprise, wondering how reliable a witness the farmer was. A drunken farmer catching a drunken monk climbing out of a well stretched his imagination a bit.

"Oh no! Katahachi gets the wine for the god. Some farmers do. To welcome the paddy god. Katahachi buys only the best, and fresh every day." She shook her head. "Katahachi believed the god resided in his fields until Tsume's murder. Now, he says, the god has left because her death has polluted his farm. He's one unhappy man, is Katahachi."

Akitada knew all about welcoming the paddy god. During the first months of the year, each farmer set up an altar to the paddy god in his home or near his paddies and served up refreshments of boiled rice, nuts, and wine, thus tempting the god to take up his abode there during the crucial time of the new planting.

"You can't blame him," he commented. "Misfortune has struck his house twice. He lost both his daughter and his savings."

"And the paddy god, too."

The door curtain flew back and two young men walked in. The shorter one was muscular, with a pugnacious jaw and the red tunic of a local constable; the other one looked frail and had a face scarred by smallpox. He wore the bright blue quilted jacket and patterned

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trousers of a city dandy. They were laughing at some joke.

The thin fellow tossed a silver coin on the platform. "Some of your best, Mrs. Endo," he called out in a reedy voice. "None of that rot-gut you sell to strangers." He glanced at Akitada without much interest. Akitada's plain dark robe and worn boots must have looked shabby compared to his own colorful outfit.

"Back from the capital early, Hanzo?" asked the hostess sourly. "And with money to spare? What happened? Were all the dancing girls taken?"

The thin fellow frowned. "Never mind what I do with my money. Bring the wine!"

She served them, returning the change in coppers that he pushed carelessly into his sash. His stocky companion had been staring at Akitada. Now he said, "You're not from here. Just passing through?"

Akitada raised his brows. "Don't you have anything more interesting to do in Higa than to question visitors?"

The young man flushed angrily. "I'm a police constable and like to keep an eye on strangers. We've had a murder here."

The hostess said, "Mind your manners, Gombei. The gentleman is from the capital, come to check into the missing silver." She told Akitada, "Gombei was fond of the dead girl, so he's a bit jumpy, sir."

Gombei bowed to Akitada. "Sorry if I was out of line, sir. Didn't mean to be rude, but a man in my profession's got to be on his toes. Too much riffraff on the roads nowadays."

The thin young man pushed himself forward. "Hanzo, at your service. We all hope poor Katahachi gets his few coins back. And so will the tax collector." He giggled.

"I see," Akitada said, silently cursing the woman for giving him away. So Gombei was the constable who had beaten the monk. Akitada disapproved of unnecessary cruelty, but there appeared to be extenuating circumstances in this case. He added more mildly, "You take your responsibilities seriously, constable. That is commendable. Have you made any progress in finding the missing silver?"

The two men exchanged a glance; then Gombei said, "No, sir. We looked, of course, but I figured the police in the capital would have it out of the monk by now."

"He has been questioned but remembers nothing."

Gombei shook his head. "That's what *he* says. I bet we could've made him sing."

Akitada frowned. "The law forbids the beating of prisoners without authorization," he said severely.

"Er, yes, sir. Of course. Well, we must be going. Good luck, sir, and feel free to call on me any time." Taking his companion by the arm, he left hurriedly.

Mrs. Endo muttered, "Young good-for-nothings, both of them. Think only of their pleasure. At least Gombei's working, but that Hanzo just squanders his poor, doting mother's money in the city." She filled Akitada's cup again.

He asked, "Did the monk buy his wine here?"

"Yes. I was sorry for him, poor

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ugly thing. The children mocked him, and hardly anyone would give him anything. Some days he didn't eat. I'd feed him leftovers after hours sometimes. One day he had some coppers and asked for sake. I stared at him, and he turned as red as a maple leaf in autumn. 'It's so cold,' he says, and can't look me in the eye. Well, he was shivering, so I gave him the wine and he thanked me with such nice words, like a poem a gentleman like you might recite for some fine lady. After that he came every night for wine." She sighed. "Until that rascal Gombei arrested him."

So she had a soft heart. Somehow that unprepossessing lump of helpless humanity in the Western Prison had touched some tenderness in the old woman. "Did you ever find out where he got the money?" Akitada asked.

She shook her head. "I asked him but he clammed up. Acted ashamed somehow. It was never more than a few coppers, though."

As he paid for his wine and asked directions to Katahachi's farm, Akitada recalled the monk's peculiarly guilty manner about buying the wine. Akitada had thought it due to shame for drinking, but now he wondered.

Katahachi's farm was the usual huddle of dwelling and outbuildings gathered under a grove of pines and surrounded by paddies in various stages of preparation. Katahachi must be a hardworking farmer, Akitada thought, for his dikes and ditches were in good repair as were the roofs of his house and sheds. A few chickens and sparrows searched for millet in the courtyard, but Katahachi was not home.

Akitada tied his horse to one of the pines and went to look for him. He passed a new well and peered at the water below. Then he stuck his head into every shed, calling out each time without getting an answer. One of the sheds was filled with low trays of rice seedlings, faint green wisps in black soil. The soil looked cracked and dry, and several trays of seedlings had already succumbed to neglect. Akitada shook his head. If Katahachi had given up, he would lose his farm and starve. Every man, woman, and child depended on a plentiful rice harvest. The nation's welfare hung on the labors of even its humblest farmer.

The other sheds contained farming implements and a small stock of supplies. In one, a pile of dirty rice straw in a corner was covered with some rags; perhaps a bed for a dog. The rice barrels held just enough to see Katahachi through until harvest time. Akitada wondered if the farmer had already paid for his seed or had meant to use some of his silver to do so. Few farmers had enough seed rice by this time of year, having paid four tenths of the harvest as tax.

Near the last shed Akitada found the old well, now only a low ring of stones surrounding the opening. The farmer, or someone else, had placed some boards over the opening—rather belatedly. Akitada moved them aside. The well wasn't very deep, having been filled to

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within a man's height with stones and dirt. The dirt was scuffed, as were the stone walls of the well-shaft, marked by the monk and the policemen scrambling in and out. There was a darker area in the dirt that might be blood.

Covering the opening again, Akitada thought about the box that had contained the silver.

Twenty pieces, was it? If the monk had hidden the silver, why had it not been found by now? And the landlady had said that Ennin had always paid with copper coins.

If someone else was guilty, who was it? And why had none of the silver been spent? In a small village everyone knew everyone else's business. Sudden spending would raise instant questions. But the landlady at the hostel, for all her inquisitiveness, had known nothing.

Musing in this manner Akitada reached the rear of the farm, and there he found its owner.

Katahachi was kneeling at the edge of the first rice paddy. He had built a makeshift shrine there to the god who blessed the rice harvest. A young pine tree was placed upright in the ground and decorated with chains made from braided straw and twisted slips of papers inscribed with prayers for a good harvest. Before it Katahachi had set small dishes filled with gifts for the god. Akitada had seen many such humble arrangements throughout the country.

The farmer, a small, lean man with a skin burned dark from working in the sun, was wearing a clean white cotton jacket and pants. He must have heard Akitada's approach but did not turn. His head bowed, he muttered prayers to the divinity.

Akitada bowed to the god and softly voiced his own desire for a plentiful rice crop.

Katahachi said bitterly, "It won't do any good. He's gone. It's the pollution."

No need to ask what pollution. Katahachi's daughter had died on the property, and the Shinto divinities abhorred death. Akitada asked, "Then why do you pray?"

The farmer just shook his head in misery.

The man's misfortune must seem overwhelming to him. Akitada looked out over the waiting fields, shimmering with their new growth of myriad flowering weeds buzzing with bees, a testimony to the rich soil that awaited cultivation and the young rice plants. But who would do the planting for him as he worked the paddle pumps that would keep the fields irrigated? He had lost his daughter—a pair of skillful hands, a strong young back, and hope for future generations. As if that were not enough, he had also lost all his savings. Twenty pieces of silver was a substantial testimony to a lifetime of working hard and saving even harder. And now he believed he had also lost the blessings of the god.

"Perhaps," Akitada suggested, "the god had already bestowed his blessing and moved on before your misfortune."

Katahachi pondered this, and his face brightened. He turned to look up at his visitor and immediately bowed, touching his forehead to the

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ground. "Please forgive this poor old man, Your Honor. I've lost everything. No use asking me to pay. It's all gone."

Evidently he mistook Akitada for a tax collector. And the silver, or part of it, must have been earmarked to pay off rice loans. Akitada said soothingly, "Never mind. I'm not here for money. Please get up. I take it you are Katahachi?"

The farmer scrambled up. "Yes. This insignificant person is called Katahachi. How may I serve Your Honor?"

"I heard of your daughter's death. You have my sincere condolence."

"Yes. Terrible! Her killer took all my silver also," he said disconsolately, as if this were the greater disaster. "Twenty-five pieces. And who will plant my fields now? Already the young plants are wilting. Tsume always took care of them. Ever since her mother died."

"I am very sorry," said Akitada. "I heard your daughter had a soft heart and befriended the monk but that you disapproved."

Katahachi turned a shade darker. "That one! A vicious devil! I knew he was after my silver the first time I laid eyes on him. He was as ugly as a demon. A devil from hell disguised as a monk. Look at the mischief he did! And that foolish girl kept feeding him while he was waiting to have her and steal my silver. I thank the Buddha I won't have a devil for a grandson." He bowed three times in the direction of the monastery and murmured, "Amida! Amida! Amida!"

Clearly Katahachi was a simple-minded man with a strong attachment to superstitions. To distract him from his tirade against the monk, Akitada nodded to the small shrine and said, "I see you made the paddy god welcome with special gifts."

Katahachi looked at the little pine and the many small bowls, each filled with food, wine, or coins. "He has not been back since it happened. Do you truly think that he has already blessed my paddies?"

"No doubt about it," said Akitada firmly. "You had better hurry up to tend to your plants and clear the paddies. I expect your neighbors' wives and daughters will plant for you."

Katahachi brightened. "Yes. You are quite right. Thank you for your sage counsel, Your Honor." He looked longingly towards the shed with the trays of plants, and Akitada turned to walk in that direction.

"How did you happen to have so much silver in the house?" he asked.

"Twenty-seven pieces!" Katahachi announced this with a mixture of pride and outrage. "Nearly thirty years I've been putting a silver coin in there whenever the harvest was good. Five of them my father left me. I was going to give those to Tsume's husband."

"You had plans for your daughter's marriage then?"

The farmer nodded. They had reached the seedling shed, and he peered in. "Look at that! Half of them dead as straw. Tsume always took care of them. Oh, it's no use. I'll never pay the next tax even if the

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authorities forgive the loan." He sagged in the doorway, squatting on his heels and shaking his head.

"Nonsense," said Akitada briskly. "Up you get and fetch some water. Most of the seedlings will revive. Hurry now!"

Katahachi muttered, but he shuffled off, returning with a pail of water from the well. Akitada watched as he moved among the trays, moistening the parched soil. "You say your daughter was to be married soon?" he asked. "A local man?"

Katahachi jerked his head in the direction of a neighboring farm. "Masazaemon's son. His widow sent a go-between. A good marriage for my girl even if the son didn't take to farming. Mind you, Tsume was very pretty and a good worker. But they were greedy. He and his mother told the go-between they wouldn't settle for less than fifteen silver pieces and my farm when I die." Katahachi left for another bucket of water.

When he reappeared, he said, "I might've done it, but then I heard that he'd been visiting the pleasure quarter in the capital, spending last harvest's money on women and wine there. I told the go-between that such a son-in-law is more trouble than he's worth."

"What about that constable? Wasn't he interested?"

Katahachi spat. "Gombei? He's got nothing. No farm. No family. Besides, Tsume couldn't stand him."

"How do you know?"

Katahachi gave a rasping laugh. "He kept bothering her until Tsume threw him in the irrigation ditch."

Akitada rode back to the capital in a thoughtful mood. His visit to the crime scene had left him more confused than ever. The biggest hole in the case against the monk—the missing silver—remained unsolved. In addition he now had several new facts that teased his mind. The girl had almost married a wealthy farmer's son, not the constable who had been in love with her and had been rejected. And her father had seemed more grieved over the loss of his silver than the death of his daughter. Had he loved her so little? The monk claimed that Katahachi had tried to beat the girl. And he had a reputation for being a tightwad. What if he had returned to find his silver gone and had taken out his fury on his daughter for allowing the theft to happen? Perhaps, having strangled Tsume, he had put the body and the empty box in the well, trying to pin her death on some robber. He was a liar, for the amount of his loss had grown even as he had told Akitada about it. Clearly he expected to be forgiven the debt because of the tragedy. Katahachi's tale of woe had taken on a sinister significance. And what about Ennin? If the monk had stolen the silver, where had he obtained the coppers he had paid the old woman for the wine?

Immersed in such disturbing thoughts, Akitada almost passed another humble shrine to the paddy god. This one was near the road,

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perhaps so that passing travelers could offer their prayers.

Akitada dismounted to add his requests for a plentiful harvest. When he reached the decorated pine, he saw that the offerings, a small bowl of rice and another of nuts, were much more modest than Katahachi's. But then Katahachi had been at pains to counteract the pollution of his daughter's murder. He had heaped several bowls with the best rice and added a large flask of rice wine plus assorted nuts and fruits and, for good measure, a plate of copper coins.

Akitada clapped his hands to announce his presence to the god and bowed deeply. As he murmured his request, a strange idea occurred to him. He straightened, stared at the bowls, then bowed again, giving his thanks to the god.

The rest of the journey to the capital he accomplished at a brisk canter. He went directly to the Western Prison and demanded to see the prisoner. The sergeant of the guard hedged but then compromised by having Akitada admitted while the sergeant sent a message to Kobe.

The monk looked, if anything, more repulsive than before. He had been snoring until the rattling of the cell door woke him, and he started up, his mouth sagging open and his bulbous eyes peering nearsightedly up at them. He made an unpleasant snorting sound in the back of his throat and wiped some spittle from his chin. "Ahem," he rasped, making a move to rise and subsiding with a groan. "Is it you again, sir? You catch me at a disadvantage. Day and night are no longer distinct, and so I sleep whenever I can. It's one of the benefits of being incarcerated."

The guard snapped, "We'll see about that. Criminals of your kind shouldn't be allowed to sleep. Next you'll kill and rape people just so you can get in jail and lie about all day snoring your head off, you lazy beast."

Akitada told the guard, "You may leave. I'll call you when I am done."

The man gave Akitada's slender figure a dubious glance and went to check the prisoner's chains. "I suppose you're safe enough if you stay away from him, sir."

"I have just returned from Higa," Akitada told the monk when they were alone. "Tell me, Ennin, why did you not stay at the temple while you were in the village?"

The ugly face flushed, and the protruding eyes grew moist. "They threw me out," he muttered. "It's my drinking. You know I get into mischief when I drink."

There it was again, the sense that this ugly, unloved human being had somehow become convinced that he was responsible for all sorts of misdeeds while drunk. "Were you already fond of wine when you became a monk?" Akitada asked curiously.

"Oh no. It was due to my work. And it came upon me so gradually, so very pleasantly, that I considered myself especially blessed. You see, I was put in charge of brewing the sake."

"You were brewing sake in a monastery?"

"Oh yes. By imperial order. We made the finest sake you could

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wish to taste. And I made sure of it by tasting every batch. I have a very fine tongue for good sake, sir."

Akitada leaned against the cell wall and marveled at the contradictions of the Buddhist faith. It forbade the consumption of sake but most practically turned its hand to providing the rest of the nation with it. And so Ennin, tasting his brew industriously, had become too fond of it and got into "mischief." Whereupon his monastery had, no doubt regretfully, decided to do without his superior brewing skills.

"The rice must be polished most thoroughly, you see, to aid in the fermentation," Ennin was telling him eagerly, "and then it is boiled in the finest spring water. Fushimi has especially good water. Then yeast is added and it is steamed again, and more water and rice are added, altogether three times—but you will not wish to hear all that, I'm sure. Towards the end I made a few mistakes. The tasting . . . sometimes you cannot be certain and must make adjustments, and the sake was of the sweetest, most potent kind–everyone said so–and I made some miscalculations, fell asleep at a crucial time, overturned a barrel or two, and spoiled a few batches." He sagged in sudden dejection. "They were quite right to send me away."

"You must miss your daily ration of sake," commented Akitada dryly.

Ennin gave a rueful nod. "People are very good, but they don't offer wine to a monk."

"But you bought wine from the woman at the hostel, didn't you?"

Ennin cringed but nodded again.

"Where did you get the copper coins?"

The monk shrank farther into himself. "Some people give money to poor monks," he whispered.

"Who gave you those coins?"

No answer.

"Did you steal them?"

Ennin raised both hands to his face and began to sob.

"I saw that you slept in one of Katahachi's sheds. Did you steal the coins from his shrine to the paddy god?"

The fat monk wailed and moaned, making snuffling, gulping noises.

Akitada waited until he became calmer, then said more gently, "You know, you should have told the police about that. They think you bought the wine with the silver that was in Katahachi's box."

Ennin raised a blubbery face from his hands and gaped at Akitada. "But I must have done so. The box was in the well when they arrested me. Along with poor Tsume."

"I think the day of Tsume's death you went to get Katahachi's offerings as usual, eating the food, drinking the wine, and taking the coins. Then you bought more wine and got drunk. On your way back to Katahachi's shed, you stumbled into the old well and passed out. Someone else later threw the dead girl and the box down there."

For a long time Ennin said nothing. Then he whispered, "Thank you. Amida is good," and bowed his head in prayer.

Heavy steps approached outside, and the cell door clanked open again. Kobe strode in with a broad

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smile. "I was told you were here, sir," he said genially, "and came right away. The trial is to start tomorrow. If there is anything new, I would be grateful for the information. We like to give the judge a sound case."

Akitada explained how Ennin had been helping himself to Katahachi's offerings to the paddy god.

Kobe frowned. "What paddy god? You don't mean that farmer's been leaving money lying about for anyone to steal?" The prisoner put his head in his hands again and gave a low moan.

"Katahachi is such a miser that his generosity to the paddy god is the talk of the village," said Akitada. "Of course, in a rice-growing community nobody would dare touch what is the god's. They fear a bad harvest too much. Katahachi was convinced the god was taking his gifts until the day Tsume died."

"The fool." Kobe glared at Ennin. "And nobody but a Buddhist monk would steal from the paddy god. You probably thought a bad harvest would bring more worshippers to Buddha."

"Oh no," wailed the prisoner. "I would never do such a thing. My own monastery had a shrine right in its grounds. We respect the ancient gods as deeply as you. I don't know what came over me. At first it was the food. I had not eaten in more than a day, and I thought the god wouldn't mind if we shared. But there was also a flask of wine there and . . . I took just a tiny taste, for memory's sake. It was delicious, but I could not quite make out how it differed from our own wine and took another sip. I'm afraid, superintendent, that after that I could not control myself, and my old weakness was upon me once again. It got worse, and one day I couldn't resist taking a few coppers to buy more wine. And after that . . ." His voice trailed off miserably.

"You should be ashamed of yourself!" snapped Kobe. "Where's your self-control? Anyway, you're by no means in the clear. It only explains how you paid for the wine."

The monk nodded. "I know. But the gentleman thinks I'm innocent. And I've been thinking and thinking these many days, and I really never believed I could have done what they accused me of. Tsume was very kind to me. I used to think how lovely she was, just like a beautiful flower. Beauty is very precious to me because I'm so ugly myself, you see. So I really don't think I would have done anything to harm Tsume."

Kobe stared at him. "I suppose that means you're retracting your confession," he snapped and turned abruptly to leave.

Akitada nodded to Ennin and followed Kobe back to the prison supervisor's office. There Kobe faced him. "Do you by chance have another suspect to offer in his place?" he demanded.

Akitada hesitated. "No. But . . ."

"Yes, yes. I had my doubts. But what now?" When Akitada said nothing, he stiffened. "Well, it's not your problem after all. I'll think of something." And when Akitada still did not speak, he bowed with formal politeness. "Since our paths will hardly cross after you take up

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your high office in Kyushu, allow me to express my gratitude for your sage counsel in this trifling matter."

There was a time when Kobe's quick mood changes had angered Akitada, but with success had come tolerance. His new assignment was not announced yet, so he did not comment on it and merely said mildly, "You did not let me finish. As I indicated, I visited Higa village. I think you must find the silver. When you do, you will also discover who killed the girl, for she gave her life for Katahachi's silver."

Kobe snorted. "Do you expect me to search every farm, stable, hostel, shrine, hut, and temple there? Where am I to start? What if the silver is gone? It does not take long to get rid of money in the capital. It's only a few hours from the village."

"So it is," said Akitada quickly. "So it is. How clever of you! I had not thought of that. Then all you have to do is to ask who has visited the capital since the murder."

"Well, we know Katahachi did. You don't suppose he lost the money gambling and only pretended someone stole it?"

"Ah! Entirely possible. But would he kill his daughter?"

Kobe chewed on his mustache. "No. I suppose not. He might have beaten her, but he needed her to tend his fields. What about that constable who had his eye on her?"

"Another good possibility. She was promised to another man and rejected his attentions. He might have become angry enough to attack her. Perhaps he did not mean to kill her, but once she was dead, he took the silver also."

"And then the bastard tried to pin it on the monk."

"Yes, he did beat him and got a confession. But did he leave for the capital during the crucial time? Of course, you can always search his place for the silver."

"I'll do that."

"Good. And you might ask a few questions of a certain Hanzo who seems to be his friend. The owner of the hostel, Mrs. Endo, made some comment that he has been unusually flush with money—I saw him pay with a silver coin—after returning from the pleasure quarter of the capital."

Kobe's chin sagged. "What? Nobody mentioned him to us."

Akitada smiled. "Village people don't volunteer gossip to strange policemen but talk quite readily to each other. I suggest we go back. If you invite the whole village to a hearing, you may discover other secrets."

Kobe considered, then smiled broadly. "Did you say 'we'?"

When Akitada and Kobe entered the hostel the next day, the villagers and local police had already assembled. Gombei stood stiffly at attention in front of the other constables. Towards the back the reedy youth Hanzo waited next to a tall, stiff-backed, elderly female with the sturdy, sunburned features of a farmer's wife. She held a bamboo fan and stretched her neck to watch Kobe and Akitada. Katahachi waited in front of a group of farmers, looking expectant.

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Akitada nodded a greeting to Mrs. Endo, who hovered, bright-eyed with curiosity, near the wine barrels. He and Kobe removed their boots and seated themselves on the wooden platform. Everyone bowed, and Kobe told Gombei and Katahachi to approach. The old man and the young one knelt and bowed again.

"I have assembled the village here because there are more questions concerning Tsume's death and the theft of Katahachi's silver," Kobe announced. "Suspicions have been raised about police procedure in the investigation. Corporal Gombei has been accused of beating a false confession out of the monk Ennin."

He gestured, and two burly guards from the capital moved to the front and turned to face the villagers, chains and metal rods clanking at their leather belts, their leather whips at the ready. Gombei began to tremble. "Take a good look, corporal," Kobe growled. "That's the equipment we use in the capital when prisoners won't tell the truth during official interrogations. These men are specially trained and hate corrupt policemen, but they won't use their fists and boots on you while nobody is looking. Oh no. They only use their whips openly and only in the service of justice. Now, what do you know about this silver?"

Gombei shuddered and cried, "I didn't touch any of the silver."

"Hah!" cried Kobe. "But you know who did!"

Gombei looked around desperately. "No . . . I didn't mean . . ." He broke off when one of the guards began to unwind the leather thongs of his whip.

"You were saying?" Kobe asked silkily.

"Superintendent!" a woman's voice interrupted.

The elderly female at Hanzo's side pushed forward through the crowd and knelt.

"This insignificant person humbly begs to be heard," she announced. When Kobe nodded, she turned and pointed her fan at Gombei. "That person has long been a bad influence in this village. Everybody knows that he drinks and fights and chases after women, and he's been bothering Tsume for months. If the monk didn't do it, no doubt Gombei's guilty. But my son and I have nothing to do with this matter and I beg that we be excused. We have no information about the crime. Please allow us to return to our work."

"State your name!" barked Kobe, eyeing her suspiciously.

She bowed. "This insignificant person is the widow of Masazaemon."

Akitada gave her a sharp look, then said to Kobe, "I believe this is the mother of the Hanzo I mentioned. The young man planned to marry the dead girl."

Mrs. Masazaemon stiffened. "No, no. We turned down the offer because the girl was quite unsuitable."

Katahachi burst into violent protest at this, and Kobe informed her, "You are a material witness and will remain." The woman bowed and returned to her place.

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Kobe turned back to Gombei. "You were about to tell us who took the silver," he reminded him.

Gombei was sweating. "Your Honor misunderstood. What I said has nothing to do with this crime. A friend offered me a loan of two silver pieces when I complained that my uniform was getting shabby." He added virtuously, "Of course I had to refuse. A policeman cannot afford to be indebted to someone in his village."

This was so patently lame that Kobe merely snapped, "The friend's name?"

Gombei flushed and muttered something.

"Speak up!" snarled a guard, tapping him sharply on the head with his whip handle.

"It was Hanzo," Gombei admitted sullenly. "He always has money to spare. His mother gives it to him."

Hanzo's mother cried, "Gombei is a liar. Hanzo has no silver. We are very poor."

One of the farmers shouted, "You're poor because you let him go to the capital to spend all the harvest money. He even sold your seed rice, and that's why you have no rice seedlings to plant this spring. I told you so when you came asking for some of mine."

Furiously Hanzo's mother turned on him. "You talk too much. It is not Hanzo's fault that his father died and left him destitute. The boy's not strong enough to be a farmer. He goes to the capital to study to become a teacher."

There was subdued mirth at this among the farmers. Akitada remembered the young man's flashy clothes and the carelessly tossed silver coin. "I think," he said aloud, "that a parent may not always know what a grown son does. You did not see him pay for wine with a silver coin as I did yesterday."

"You," Kobe told Hanzo, "come up here!"

The reedy youth sidled up to his mother, who demanded, "Did you help yourself to my seed money?"

One of the farmers said, "*What* seed money?"

Hanzo flushed.

"Don't make a scene, Mother. It was nothing. Just one piece I had saved."

Mrs. Endo suddenly piped up, "Oh, you had more than one piece. You've been paying with silver ever since the night you and Gombei got drunk. I saw you pull several pieces from your sleeve and wondered if your mother had sold that rice paddy to Katahachi."

Katahachi cried, "She offered to sell it, but I said no. It's bad land, hard to get to and the water disappears as quickly as in a rice pot."

"It's perfectly good land," snapped the mother, glaring around her. "Katahachi's an old skinflint, and his daughter was a sharp-tongued harpy. Because we turned down the girl, they spread scandal about us."

Katahachi, Mrs. Endo, Gombei, and several farmers all started speaking at once. Kobe roared for silence and then asked Mrs. Endo, "Which night was it that Hanzo and Gombei got drunk and paid with silver?"

She thought. "I remember the monk came that night and bought his wine."

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"Could it have been the night of the murder?"

She looked startled, then nodded. "Yes. It must have been. It was the last time the monk came, and when they told me about his being drunk and killing Tsume, I remember thinking that it must've been on my wine." She looked a bit guilty. "Gombei didn't ask me if he got the wine here."

Kobe grunted. "He didn't care. Too busy beating a confession out of him." He turned to Hanzo. "Did you take Katahachi's silver?"

"No," cried Hanzo. "Why blame me when vagrants and criminals roam our village?"

Some farmers murmured in support, but Katahachi stared at Hanzo fixedly. "You," he cried, "you took my silver because I turned you down. I wouldn't buy your barren paddy nor give you Tsume with a fat dowry. I want my silver back, every piece. And if you've spent it, you piece of dung, I'll have your land. I should have known it was you, always snooping about and pestering Tsume at her work. You lazy dog, you just wanted my silver and my hardworking Tsume so you could waste my money on pleasure while she worked your fields for you."

"My son is no thief," cried the widow.

Ignoring them, Kobe turned to Gombei. "Pay attention now, for your life may depend on it. While we are talking, my men are searching both your place and Hanzo's farm. They are very thorough."

Gombei paled, and Hanzo clutched his mother's arm.

Kobe continued. "We know you were together that night. Did you and Hanzo go to Katahachi's farm?"

Perspiration pearled on Gombei's face. "I m–might have done," he stammered. "I mean, I was pretty drunk already that day. Hanzo came to the police station and told me that Tsume was sorry about throwing me in the ditch and wanted to talk to me."

"That's a lie," cried Hanzo.

The door of the taproom opened, and one of the metropolitan police constables came in. He carried a small clinking bag in one hand and dangled a wooden plaque on a string of small shells in the other.

Katahachi rushed forward, grabbing for the amulet. "My wife's amulet," he cried. "I kept it with the silver." His eyes went to the bundle, and his face lit up. "You found it. You found my silver. Amida be praised!" Falling to his knees, he embraced the constable's legs.

"Good work," boomed Kobe. "Where was it?"

"Where you said to look, sir. In the young man's clothes chest. Five pieces."

Hanzo's mother cried, "Then that Gombei put it there!"

"Five pieces?" wailed Katahachi. "I had thirty!"

But Kobe was looking at Hanzo's mother. "Hah," he said. "The constable used no names, but you knew all along your son had the silver. You are both under arrest!"

Mrs. Masazaemon turned white. Her son fell to his knees and started weeping. "I didn't kill her," he whimpered. "I swear it! Gombei's

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trying to pin the murder on me when all I did was take the silver. And there were only fifteen pieces," he wailed with a look at Katahachi, who called him a liar and demanded the other twenty-five.

Gombei was stunned at this betrayal by his erstwhile friend. "He m–must've killed her because I didn't," he stammered, then burst into speech. "He'd been talking about how easy it would be. He knew where Katahachi kept the silver and said a penny-pinching fool like him did not deserve it. When I reminded him that I was sworn to uphold the law, he laughed, saying he'd only been joking but that it was a good time to see Tsume because Katahachi was going to the capital and wouldn't be back till late. So we went. Hanzo stayed in the main room while I went to look for Tsume. She was sleeping in the back of the house, but when she saw me, she got angry. She called me names, and threw things at me. I was so upset, I ran out the back door and home. She must have caught Hanzo stealing the silver, and he killed her."

Hanzo screamed, "He lies! He told me himself he meant to rape her but she fought him off. I think he was afraid she'd talk, so he strangled her. When I heard all the shouting, I ran with the box of silver."

This caused another burst of excitement, and Kobe shouted again for silence. Turning to Akitada, he said, "It worked, but one of them is lying."

Akitada shook his head. "No. They are both telling the truth, at least as they see it. I think there is more to come. Why not charge them all and see what happens?"

The guards had established order with their whip handles, and Gombei was rubbing his head while Hanzo sobbed piteously in the arms of his mother.

Kobe regarded the group in disgust. "All right," he said. "The men are charged with attempted rape, murder, and robbery, and the woman with being an accessory. We'll get at the truth with some floggings." He nodded towards Hanzo. "Start with him."

Hanzo screamed as the guards bent to rip his robe down to his waist.

"No," cried his mother, wrapping her arms around her son. "He didn't kill her. I did."

Shocked silence fell.

The widow released her son and stepped forward. Her voice was emotionless but firm. "Hanzo told the truth. The girl came to my house and accused him. She was very disrespectful. My son denied taking the silver, but after she left, I searched his room and found the box. My son is weak, and that Gombei must've put the idea in his head. I took the box with the silver back to Tsume and begged her not to ruin my son. I even offered to give them the rice field to forget the matter, but she wouldn't hear of it. Suddenly something came over me then, some evil demon. I didn't mean to kill her, but my hands went around her neck and I shook her. When I saw that I had killed her, I carried her to the well, along with the empty box, thinking to

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make it look as if she'd been killed by robbers. The silver I hid under Hanzo's clothes."

Kobe rose. He seemed to tower over the woman.

"You *killed* her?" he roared. "Your obsession with your worthless son caused you to murder an innocent person, and you would have let the monk die for it? And here today you put the blame on Gombei, a disgraceful wretch but neither a thief nor a murderer. Be careful what you say, for your punishment will be severe. The law does not tolerate false accusations."

She threw back her head. "Do with me what you want. I'm a mother. I did it for my son!" She turned to embrace Hanzo.

But Hanzo flinched away with a look of horror. "How could you, Mother?" he exclaimed. "You've ruined my life!"

Ennin was walking out of the gate of the Western Prison, when Akitada walked in. He looked cleaner and healthier, his hair and beard trimmed, his eyes clear, and a spring in his step.

"Ah," cried Akitada, pausing to take in the clean cotton pants and jacket that had replaced the filthy monk's robe, "You are a changed man, Ennin."

"Yes. And I've taken back my old name, Higeyoshi, sir." The ugly man looked down at himself with a grin. "I find the religious life is not for me. In any case, a drunken monk gets in too much trouble while a drunken brewer of sake or a poet or even a high official like you enjoys the respect of all his friends. I am a master at brewing sake, and not bad at making poems either." He blinked up at the flowering cherry tree above them and recited:

"Come cherry flowers!
Now's the time for us to go.
If we hang about too long,
we'll weary our company."

Bowing to Akitada, he smiled sweetly and walked out the gate in a gust of white petals.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

Tennessee's Partner

Bret Harte



Illustration by Meredith Lightbown

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I do not think that we ever knew his real name. Our ignorance of it certainly never gave us any social inconvenience, for at Sandy Bar in 1854 most men were christened anew. Sometimes these appellatives were derived from some distinctiveness of dress, as in the case of "Dungaree Jack"; or from some peculiarity of habit, as shown in "Saleratus Bill," so-called from an undue proportion of that chemical in his daily bread; or from some unlucky slip, as exhibited in "The Iron Pirate," a mild, inoffensive man, who earned that baleful title by his unfortunate mispronunciation of the term "iron pyrites." Perhaps this may have been the beginning of a rude heraldry, but I am constrained to think that it was because a man's real name in that day rested solely upon his own unsupported statement. "Call yourself Clifford, do you?" said Boston, addressing a timid newcomer with infinite scorn; "hell is full of such Cliffords!" He then introduced the unfortunate man, whose name happened to be really Clifford, as "Jay-bird Charley"—an unhallowed inspiration of the moment that clung to him ever after.

But to return to Tennessee's Partner, whom we never knew by any other than this relative title; that he had ever existed as a separate and distinct individuality we only learned later. It seems that in 1853 he left Poker Flat to go to San Francisco, ostensibly to procure a wife. He never got any farther than Stockton. At that place he was attracted by a young person who waited upon the table at the hotel where he took his meals. One morning he said something to her which caused her to smile not unkindly; to somewhat coquettishly break a plate of toast over his upturned, serious, simple face; and to retreat to the kitchen. He followed her and emerged a few moments later covered with more toast and victory. That day week they were married by a Justice of the Peace, and returned to Poker Flat. I am aware that something more might be made of this episode, but I prefer to tell it as it was current at Sandy Bar—in the gulches and barrooms—where all sentiment was modified by a strong sense of humor.

Of their married felicity but little is known, perhaps for the reason that Tennessee, then living with his partner, one day took occasion to say something to the bride on his own account, at which, it is said, she smiled not unkindly and chastely retreated—this time as far as Marysville, where Tennessee followed her, and where they went to housekeeping without the aid of a Justice of the Peace. Tennessee's Partner took the loss of his wife simply and seriously as was his fashion. But to everybody's surprise, when Tennessee one day returned from Marysville without his partner's wife—she having smiled and retreated with somebody else—Tennessee's Partner was the first

Written about 1870.

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man to shake his hand and greet him with affection. The boys who had gathered in the canyon to see the shooting were naturally indignant. Their indignation might have found vent in sarcasm but for a certain look in Tennessee's Partner's eye that indicated a lack of humorous appreciation. In fact, he was a grave man, with a steady application to practical detail which was unpleasant in a difficulty.

Meanwhile a popular feeling against Tennessee had grown up on the Bar. He was known to be a gambler; he was suspected to be a thief. In these suspicions Tennessee's Partner was equally compromised; his continued intimacy with Tennessee after the affair above quoted could only be accounted for on the hypothesis of a copartnership of crime. At last Tennessee's guilt became flagrant. One day he overtook a stranger on his way to Red Dog. The stranger afterward related that Tennessee beguiled the time with interesting anecdote and reminiscence but illogically concluded the interview in the following words: "And now, young man, I'll trouble you for your knife, your pistols, and your money. You see your weppings might get you into trouble at Red Dog, and your money's a temptation to the evilly disposed. I think you said your address was San Francisco. I shall endeavor to call." It may be stated here that Tennessee had a fine flow of humor which no business preoccupation could wholly subdue.

This exploit was his last. Red Dog and Sandy Bar made common cause against the highwayman. Tennessee was hunted in very much the same fashion as his prototype, the grizzly. As the toils closed around him, he made a desperate dash through the Bar, emptying his revolver at the crowd before the Arcade Saloon, and so on up Grizzly Canyon, but at its farther extremity he was stopped by a small man on a gray horse. The men looked at each other a moment in silence. Both were fearless, both self-possessed and independent, and both types of a civilization that in the seventeenth century would have been called heroic but in the nineteenth simply "reckless."

"What have you got there?—I call," said Tennessee quietly.

"Two bowers and an ace," said the stranger as quietly, showing two revolvers and a bowie knife.

"That takes me," returned Tennessee, and with this gamblers' epigram he threw away his useless pistol and rode back with his captor.

It was a warm night. The cool breeze which usually sprang up with the going down of the sun behind the chaparral-crested mountain was that evening withheld from Sandy Bar. The little canyon was stifling with heated resinous odors, and the decaying driftwood on the Bar sent forth faint, sickening exhalations. The feverishness of day, and its fierce passions, still filled the camp. Lights moved restlessly along the bank of the river, striking no answering reflection from its tawny current. Against the blackness of the pines the windows of the

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old loft above the express office stood out staringly bright; and through their curtainless panes the loungers below could see the forms of those who were even then deciding the fate of Tennessee. And above all this, etched on the dark firmament, rose the Sierra, remote and passionless, crowned with remoter passionless stars.

The trial of Tennessee was conducted as fairly as was consistent with a judge and jury who felt themselves to some extent obliged to justify, in their verdict, the previous irregularities of arrest and indictment. The law of Sandy Bar was implacable, but not vengeful. The excitement and personal feeling of the chase were over; with Tennessee safe in their hands they were ready to listen patiently to any defense, which they were already satisfied was insufficient. There being no doubt in their own minds, they were willing to give the prisoner the benefit of any that might exist. Secure in the hypothesis that he ought to be hanged on general principles, they indulged him with more latitude of defense than his reckless hardihood seemed to ask. The Judge appeared to be more anxious than the prisoner, who, otherwise unconcerned, evidently took a grim pleasure in the responsibility he had created. "I don't take any hand in this yer game," had been his invariable, but good-humored reply to all questions. The Judge—who was also his captor—for a moment vaguely regretted that he had not shot him "on sight" that morning but presently dismissed this human weakness as unworthy of the judicial mind. Nevertheless, when there was a tap at the door, and it was said that Tennessee's Partner was there on behalf of the prisoner, he was admitted at once without question. Perhaps the younger members of the jury, to whom the proceedings were becoming irksomely thoughtful, hailed him as a relief.

For he was not, certainly, an imposing figure. Short and stout, with a square face, sunburned into a preternatural redness, clad in a loose duck "jumper" and trousers streaked and splashed with red soil, his aspect under any circumstances would have been quaint, and was now even ridiculous. As he stooped to deposit at his feet a heavy carpetbag he was carrying, it became obvious, from partially developed legends and inscriptions, that the material with which his trousers had been patched had been originally intended for a less ambitious covering. Yet he advanced with great gravity, and after having shaken the hand of each person in the room with labored cordiality, he wiped his serious, perplexed face on a red bandanna handkerchief a shade lighter than his complexion, laid his powerful hand upon the table to steady himself, and thus addressed the Judge: "I was passin' by," he began by way of apology, "and I thought I'd just step in and see how things was gittin' on with Tennessee thar—my pardner. It's a hot night. I disremember any sich weather before on the Bar."

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He paused a moment, but nobody volunteering any other meteorological recollection, he again had recourse to his pocket handkerchief and for some moments mopped his face diligently.

"Have you anything to say in behalf of the prisoner?" said the Judge finally.

"Thet's it," said Tennessee's Partner in a tone of relief. "I come yar as Tennessee's pardner—knowing him nigh on four year, off and on, wet and dry, in luck and out o' luck. His ways ain't allers my ways, but thar ain't any p'ints in that young man, thar ain't any liveliness as he's been up to, as I don't know. And you sez to me, sez you—confidential-like, and between man and man—sez you, 'Do you know anything in his behalf?' and I sez to you, sez I—confidential-like, as between man and man—'What should a man know of his pardner?' "

"Is this all you have to say?" asked the Judge, impatiently, feeling, perhaps, that a dangerous sympathy of humor was beginning to humanize the Court.

"Thet's so," continued Tennessee's Partner. "It ain't for me to say anything agin' him. And now, what's the case? Here's Tennessee wants money, wants it bad, and doesn't like to ask it of his old pardner. Well, what does Tennessee do? He lays for a stranger, and he fetches that stranger. And you lays for him and you fetches him, and the honors is easy. And I put it to you, bein' a far-minded man, and to you, gentlemen, all, as far-minded men, ef this isn't so."

"Prisoner," said the Judge, interrupting, "have you any questions to ask this man?"

"No! no!" continued Tennessee's Partner hastily. "I play this yer hand alone. To come down to the bedrock, it's just this: Tennessee thar has played it pretty rough and expensivelike on a stranger and on this yer camp. And now, what's the fair thing? Some would say more; some would say less. Here's seventeen hundred dollars in coarse gold and a watch, it's about all my pile—and call it square!" And before a hand could be raised to prevent him, he had emptied the contents of the carpetbag upon the table.

For a moment his life was in jeopardy. One or two men sprang to their feet, several hands groped for hidden weapons, and a suggestion to "throw him from the window" was only overridden by a gesture from the Judge. Tennessee laughed. And apparently oblivious of the excitement, Tennessee's Partner improved the opportunity to mop his face again with his handkerchief.

When order was restored, and the man was made to understand, by the use of forcible figures and rhetoric, that Tennessee's offense could not be condoned by money, his face took a more serious and sanguinary hue, and those who were nearest to him noticed that his rough hand trembled slightly on the table. He hesitated a moment as

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he slowly returned the gold to the carpetbag, as if he had not yet entirely caught the elevated sense of justice which swayed the tribunal and was perplexed with the belief that he had not offered enough. Then he turned to the Judge, and saying, "This yer is a lone hand, played alone, and without my pardner," he bowed to the jury and was about to withdraw, when the Judge called him back. "If you have anything to say to Tennessee, you had better say it now." For the first time that evening the eyes of the prisoner and his strange advocate met. Tennessee smiled, showed his white teeth, and, saying, "Euchred, old man!," held out his hand. Tennessee's Partner took it in his own, and saying, "I just dropped in as I was passin' to see how things was gettin' on," let the hand passively fall, and adding that "it was a warm night," again mopped his face with his handkerchief, and without another word withdrew.

The two men never again met each other alive. For the unparalleled insult of a bribe offered to Judge Lynch—who, whether bigoted, weak, or narrow, was at least incorruptible—firmly fixed in the mind of that mythical personage any wavering determination of Tennessee's fate, and at the break of day he was marched, closely guarded, to meet it at the top of Marley's Hill.

How he met it, how cool he was, how he refused to say anything, how perfect were the arrangements of the committee, were all duly reported, with the addition of a warning moral and example to all future evildoers, in the Red Dog *Clarion* by its editor, who was present and to whose vigorous English I cheerfully refer the reader. But the beauty of that midsummer morning, the blessed amity of earth and air and sky, the awakened life of the free woods and hills, the joyous renewal and promise of Nature, and above all, the infinite serenity that thrilled through each, was not reported, as not being a part of the social lesson. And yet, when the weak and foolish deed was done, and a life, with its possibilities and responsibilities, had passed out of the misshapen thing that dangled between earth and sky, the birds sang, the flowers bloomed, the sun shone as cheerily as before, and possibly the Red Dog *Clarion* was right.

Tennessee's Partner was not in the group that surrounded the ominous tree. But as they turned to disperse, attention was drawn to the singular appearance of a motionless donkey cart halted at the side of the road. As they approached, they at once recognized the venerable "Jenny" and the two-wheeled cart as the property of Tennessee's Partner—used by him in carrying dirt from his claim—and a few paces distant the owner of the equipage himself, sitting under a buckeye tree wiping the perspiration from his glowing face. In answer to an inquiry he said he had come for the body of the "diseased," "if it was all the same to the committee." He didn't wish to "hurry any-

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thing"; he could "wait." He was not working that day, and when the gentlemen were done with the "diseased," he would take him. "Ef thar is any present," he added in his simple, serious way, "as would care to jine in the fun'l, they kin come." Perhaps it was from a sense of humor, which I have already intimated was a feature of Sandy Bar—perhaps it was from something even better than that—but two-thirds of the loungers accepted the invitation at once.

It was noon when the body of Tennessee was delivered into the hands of his partner. As the cart drew up to the fatal tree, we noticed that it contained a rough, oblong box—apparently made from a section of sluicing and half filled with bark and the tassels of pine. The cart was further decorated with slips of willow and made fragrant with buckeye blossoms. When the body was deposited in the box, Tennessee's Partner drew over it a piece of tarred canvas and, gravely mounting the narrow seat in front, with his feet upon the shafts, urged the little donkey forward. The equipage moved slowly on at that decorous pace which was habitual with "Jenny" even under less solemn circumstances. The men—half curiously, half jestingly, but all good-humoredly—strolled along beside the cart, some in advance, some a little in the rear of the homely catafalque. But whether from the narrowing of the road or some present sense of decorum, as the cart passed on the company fell to the rear in couples, keeping step, and otherwise assuming the external show of a formal procession. Jack Folinsbee, who had at the outset played a funeral march in dumb show upon an imaginary trombone, desisted from a lack of sympathy and appreciation—not having, perhaps, your true humorist's capacity to be content with the enjoyment of his own fun.

The way led through Grizzly Canyon—by this time clothed in funereal drapery and shadows. The redwoods, burying their moccasined feet in the red soil, stood in Indian file along the track, trailing an uncouth benediction from their bending boughs upon the passing bier. A hare, surprised into helpless inactivity, sat upright and pulsating in the ferns by the roadside as the cortége went by. Squirrels hastened to gain a secure outlook from higher boughs, and the blue jays, spreading their wings, fluttered before them like outriders until the outskirts of Sandy Bar were reached and the solitary cabin of Tennessee's Partner.

Viewed under more favorable circumstances, it would not have been a cheerful place. The unpicturesque site, the rude and unlovely outlines, the unsavory details, which distinguish the nest-building of the California miner, were all here with the dreariness of decay super-added. A few paces from the cabin there was a rough enclosure which, in the brief days of Tennessee's Partner's matrimonial felicity, had been used as a garden but was now overgrown with fern. As we

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approached it, we were surprised to find that what we had taken for a recent attempt at cultivation was the broken soil about an open grave.

The cart was halted before the enclosure, and rejecting the offers of assistance with the same air of simple self-reliance he had displayed throughout, Tennessee's Partner lifted the rough coffin on his back and deposited it, unaided, within the shallow grave. He then nailed down the board which served as a lid and, mounting the little mound of earth beside it, took off his hat, and slowly mopped his face with his handkerchief. This the crowd felt was a preliminary to speech, and they disposed themselves variously on stumps and boulders and sat expectant.

"When a man," began Tennessee's Partner slowly, "has been running free all day, what's the natural thing for him to do? Why, to come home. And if he ain't in a condition to go home, what can his best friend do? Why, bring him home! And here's Tennessee has been running free, and we brings him home from his wandering." He paused and picked up a fragment of quartz, rubbed it thoughtfully on his sleeve, and went on.

"It ain't the first time that I've packed him on my back as you seed me now. It ain't the first time that I brought him to this yer cabin when he couldn't help himself; it ain't the first time that I and 'Jinny' have waited for him on yon hill and picked him up and so fetched him home when he couldn't speak and didn't know me. And now that it's the last time, why—" he paused and rubbed the quartz gently on his sleeve "—you see it's sort of rough on his pardner. And now, gentlemen," he added abruptly, picking up his long-handled shovel, "the fun'l's over, and my thanks, and Tennessee's thanks, to you for your trouble."

Resisting any proffers of assistance, he began to fill in the grave, turning his back upon the crowd that, after a few moments' hesitation, gradually withdrew. As they crossed the little ridge that hid Sandy Bar from view, some, looking back, thought they could see Tennessee's Partner, his work done, sitting upon the grave, his shovel between his knees and his face buried in bandanna handkerchief. But it was argued by others that you couldn't tell his face from his handkerchief at that distance, and this point remained undecided.

In the reaction that followed the feverish excitement of that day, Tennessee's Partner was not forgotten. A secret investigation had cleared him of any complicity in Tennessee's guilt and left only a suspicion of his general sanity. Sandy Bar made a point of calling on him and proffering various uncouth but well-meant kindnesses. But from that day his rude health and great strength seemed visibly to decline, and when the rainy season fairly set in, and the tiny grassblades

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were beginning to peep from the rocky mound above Tennessee's grave, he took to his bed.

One night, when the pines beside the cabin were swaying in the storm and trailing their slender fingers over the roof, and the roar and rush of the swollen river were heard below, Tennessee's Partner lifted his head from the pillow, saying, "It is time to go for Tennessee; I must put 'Jinny' in the cart," and would have risen from his bed but for the restraint of his attendant. Struggling, he still pursued his singular fancy: "There, now, steady, 'Jinny'—steady, old girl. How dark it is! Look out for the ruts—and look out for him, too, old gal. Sometimes, you know, when he's blind drunk, he drops down right in the trail. Keep on straight up to the pine on the top of the hill. Thar—I told you so!—thar he is—coming this way, too—all by himself sober, and his face a-shining. Tennessee! Pardner!"

And so they met.

SOLUTION TO THE NOVEMBER "UNSOLVED":

Betty Raber, wife of the hijacker on the top floor, informed on Bo Tabbs, the fence on the lam from Oslo.

FLOOR	CRIMINAL	WIFE	CRIME	FROM
5	Dan Raber	Betty	hijacker	Madrid
4	Bo Tabbs	Cora	fence	Oslo
3	Ed Quirk	Alice	embezzler	Libya
2	Abe Smith	Edna	gangster	Khartoum
1	Cal Purdy	Doris	killer	Naples

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BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



Andrew Pyper's **Lost Girls** (Delacorte, $23.95) is the haunting tale of a cocky, self-possessed young lawyer who travels north for his first murder case and finds himself on a rocky road to someplace in his mind that is very much like hell. Up in Murdoch, a small town north of Ottawa, a teacher is accused of murdering two of his teenage students. For Bartholomew Christian Crane it's an opportunity to impress the two partners in his law firm. So far, so good. But Crane's exile—the isolation from his normal routine, the emotional responses of the townspeople, the sheer mystery shrouding the deaths—begins to take its toll on an immature, imaginative, and bright man whose short life has left him untethered to anyone or anything outside himself. Crane's client is loathsome and enigmatic and unresponsive, and few people in town will have any traffic with the outsider who is trying to get the killer of their girls off scot free. The only thing needed to drive Crane from obsession into a form of madness is the revelation of one of the town's old secrets—a secret Crane himself has long buried. This is strong stuff, compelling and well-written, but closer to the mysteries Stephen King explores than to most thrillers.

Sinclair Browning's **The Sporting Club** (Bantam, $5.50) has several things going for it. Private eye Trade Ellis is an Arizona rancher, which makes Browning's heroine part sleuth, part cowgirl, and part Apache. Browning clearly loves this region, and it shows in her writing. Trade is also blessed with a "family" of sorts, both people and pets, and they add to the mix. Finally, in this book there are the repressed memories of Victoria Carpenter, a bestselling romance writer referred by a former client. Trade initially has little faith in Victoria's childhood images of gatherings when her father's buddies, a group of men who called themselves The Sporting Club in the 1960's, murdered a black man and his two sons one day at the club's family picnic. But Trade's initial instincts about this case are wrong. Almost dead wrong.

(continued on page 142)

Illustration by June Levine

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THE STORY THAT WON



Hulton/Liaison Agency

The June Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan. Honorable mentions go to Diane C. Perrone of Franklin, Wisconsin; Sharon L. Near of Puyallup, Washington; Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; S. Osborn of West Hills, California; Carolyn Ostrom of Arlington, Virginia; Stevens R. Miller of Ashburn, Virginia; Kate Karp of Long Beach, California; G. Rene Colls of La Mesa, California; R. J. Stevens of Calgary, Alberta, Canada; Andrew McAllister of Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada; Pamela R. Kressman of New Haven, Connecticut; and James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida.

THE PRICE OF HONESTY by Robert Kesling

"Yes, Inspector Farragut," I testified, "I was Sir Humphrey Matthew Sykes's chauffeur. Last Tuesday I drove him from the mansion to Chelmsford railway station. He was going to his London law office as usual, and I left him on the platform. . . . How was he dressed? Quite properly, bowler hat, umbrella, briefcase, morning attire. . . . No, sir, I've not seen him since."

The disappearance of England's most famous barrister caused quite a sensation. Known as the "Dauntless Defender of the Destitute," he never charged his impoverished clients. His sole income, I knew, came from his wife Heloise, heiress of the Blankenship fortune. Sir Humphrey was scrupulously honest.

Just yesterday I chanced upon him. He was shabbily dressed, selling pennywhistles on a London street corner. "My lord!" I gasped.

"Steady, Chumley," he responded. "I'm making a fresh start after Heloise ejected me from her mansion."

"Whatever for?" I inquired.

"I won the case of the impecunious renters against Dinglehurst Corporation—exorbitant rentals charged for cramped, unsafe, squalid tenements."

"But, sir, you were honest, surely cause for celebration."

He winced. "Honest? Yes, but unwise. I'd forgotten that Heloise *owns* Dinglehurst Corporation."

"I sincerely wish you well," I declared sympathetically. His championing of the underdog led to Sir Humphrey Matthew Sykes's downfall. Basically it was his *honesty* in all things. His honesty would always be his handicap. As I walked sadly away, I heard him intoning, "Cheap pennywhistles, anyone? . . . Poorly tuned. . . . Manufactured under sweatshop conditions. . . . Known to contain mercury. . . . Pennywhistles, anyone?"

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(continued from page 140)

AHMM's readers surely don't need me to suggest that they introduce themselves to Sue Grafton and her likeable private eye, Kinsey Millhone. Still, it might be interesting to learn that in **P Is for Peril** (Putnam, $26.95), the sixteenth novel in this bestselling alphabet series, our girl Kinsey is her old self, looking for new office digs, hanging out with her landlord and his kith and kin, neatly solving the celebrated disappearance of a highly respected local physician who runs a nursing home, and narrowly managing to escape becoming a victim herself at the hands of . . . well, enough said. I probably couldn't keep you away from sharing Kinsey's new adventure with her even if I weren't telling you how much fun you'll have in doing so.

Jamyang Norbu's **Sherlock Holmes: The Missing Years** (Bloomsbury, $23.95) ranks heads above the plethora of pastiches we've seen in the last few years. Of course, Norbu's qualifications didn't hurt. Here is one of Tibet's foremost writers—and a knowledgeable devotee of the Canon—pulling back the curtain that has shrouded the years following Holmes's 1891 plunge over the Reichenbach Falls, years the great detective explained away to Watson by commenting merely, "I traveled for two years in Tibet, therefore, and amused myself by visiting Llasa." Meet the tale's narrator, a sidekick worthy of the good doctor and both a Bengali scholar and a loyal British spy. It is his good sense and irrepressible good humor that permeate this dashing and colorful tale of an exotic land steeped in mystical power. All Holmes fans should curl up with this book tonight and learn the truth behind the great man.

Bestselling author Iris Johansen's latest adds a psychic element to the romantic thriller formula in **Final Target** (Bantam, $24.95). The novel opens with a brutal, well-organized assault on the U.S. president's vacation home in France. The attempted abduction of eight-year-old Cassie Andreas is foiled by a counter-assault team led by the mysterious Michael Travis, who then disappears. The aftermath, however, leaves Cassie in severe catatonic trauma. Travis, hunted by a shady arms dealer and the Secret Service, joins Cassie at the home of Dr. Jessica Riley, her therapist. Fine . . . until Jessica's first catatonic child-patient, her younger sister Melissa, returns from college. Melissa has never confessed to Jessica that she came back to life endowed with special psychic abilities; her mind is now screaming at her that both Cassie and Jessica are in danger. Strong characters, lots of action, a dashing hero—one can't ask for more in a novel of romantic suspense.

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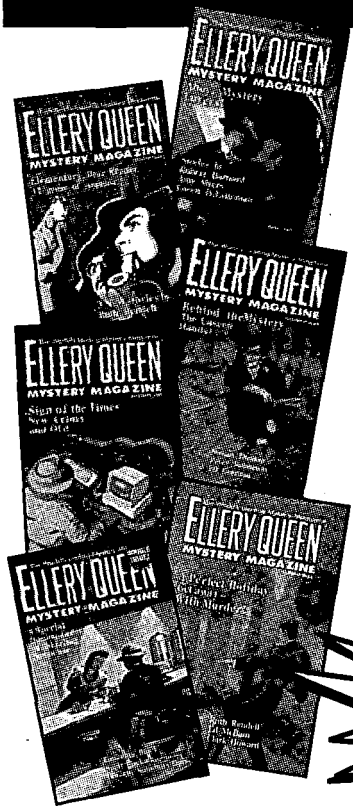
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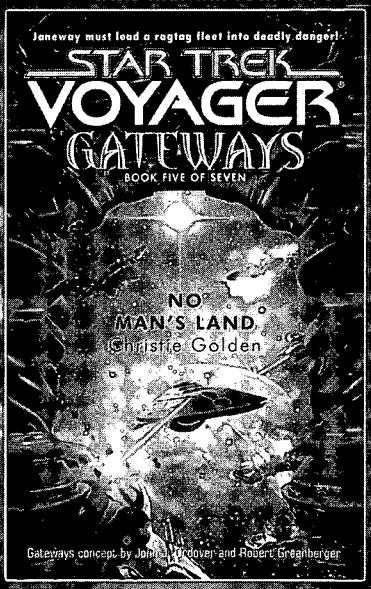
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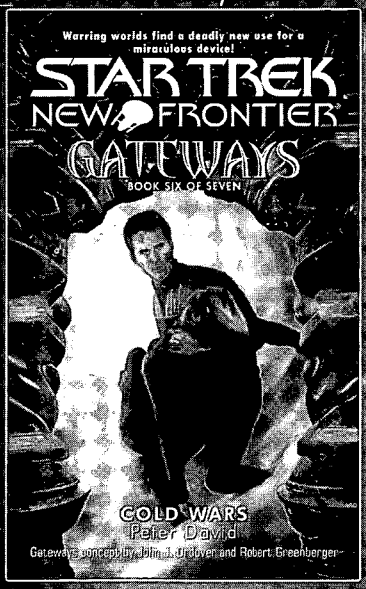
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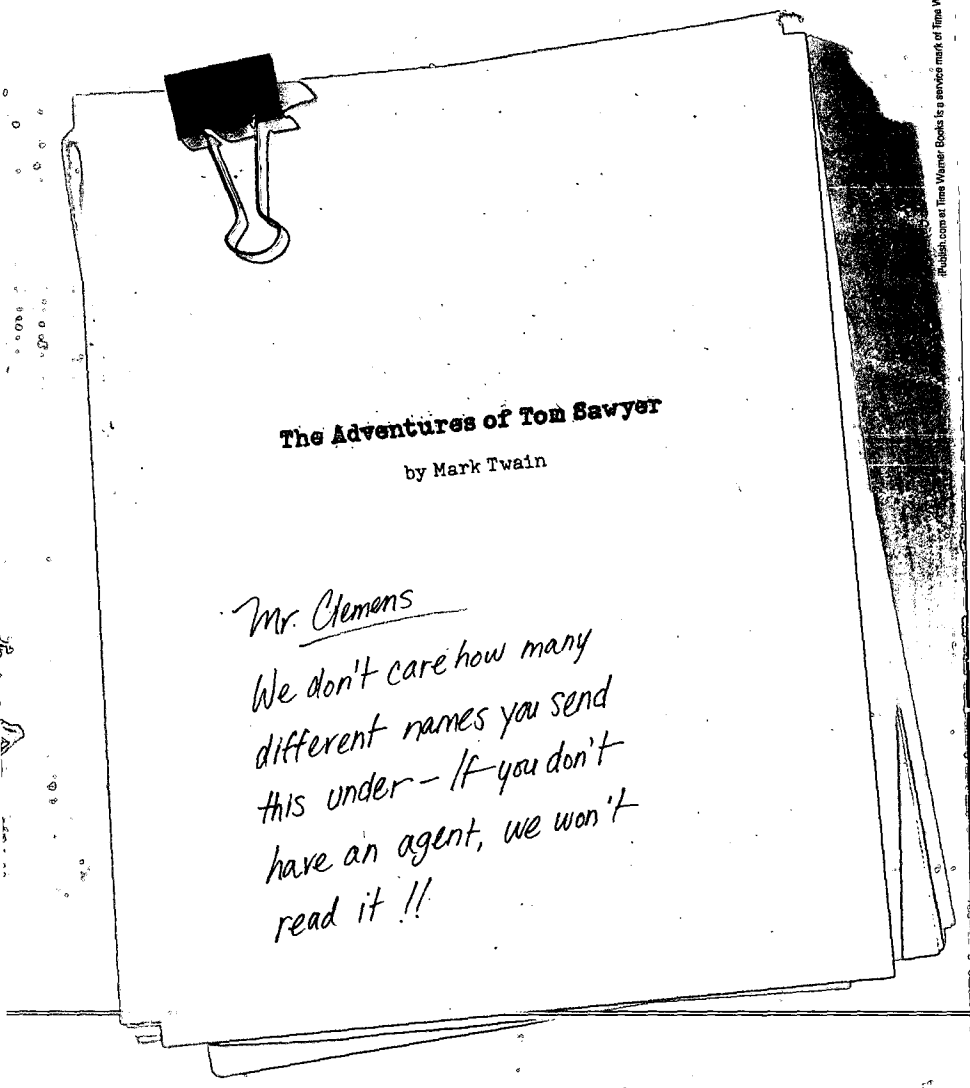
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